

## IN THE MUDDY CENTER: A PHYSICS OF NONPROPOSITIONAL THINKING

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper offers a survey of contemporary attempts to restore human thought and language to a wider realm of nonpropositional thought; along the way it highlights pitfalls regarding anthropomorphism as well as dialectical subsumption, and attempts to show alternatives ranging from poetry to nonstandard logical forms like analogy.

**KEYWORDS:** Language; Ontology; Natural History

In a work of philosophy that unearths an unorthodox line of innovation and problem construction at the juncture between physics and mathematics, Gilles Châtelet gave expression to an intellectual antagonism against the contemporary status that is conceded to traditional philosophical and scientific problems. He showed a particular uneasiness around what could be called the "naturalization" of thought. A most topical example of this naturalization is of course the claim of the neurosciences to exhaustively explain the power and genesis of thought - artistic, scientific and philosophical - on the basis of an extensive knowledge of the nervous system and the relationship it entertains to its social and biological milieus. Not mincing his words, and in a way that has been noted by at least one scientist of the brain (Alain Berthoz), Châtelet mentioned "the neuronal barbarism which exhausts itself in hunting down the recipient of the thought and in confusing learning with a pillaging of informational booty." Instead, he suggested, the German idealist philosopher "Schelling perhaps saw more clearly: he knew that thought was not always encapsulated within the brain, that it could be everywhere ... outside ... in the morning dew".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Châtelet, Gilles. *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*, 14.  
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Fearing neural reductionism, one can go too far in undermining the wonderful organ that is the brain. However, in Châtelet's particular take on the tradition of *Naturphilosophie* there is also a prescient resonance for what one could call a resurgent metaphysics of non-propositional thought, that reexplores and brings fresh provocations to a whole spectrum of relations between the physical, biological and the mental, opening to new negotiation supposedly familiar positions like panpsychism, organicism and a more recent category like biocentrism. In a tentative generalization, one could characterize the nonpropositional as an alternative offered by an updated *Naturphilosophie* against a restricted form of "naturalization" in the image of neural correlates approaches.

To be clear, what this useful category - the "nonpropositional" - captures are the various forms of the extension which makes abstract entities such as truth, method, knowledge, understanding, logical processes, criticism, measurement, hypotheses, or thought in short, a matter of events and objects whose primarily unthinking and extra-logical nature is generally considered to be unproblematic: eating, moving, growing, acting, metabolisms, rock formations. What is at stake is a massive revision of the common dismissal of this second group into mere immediacy, and their subordination to the exclusive reflectivity and representational savviness of human thought, when thinking is a question.

That breathing can be an ancestral or nonpropositional form of a logical affirmation might perhaps be an intuitive assertion, but it is not necessarily self-evident.<sup>2</sup> A different version of the same claim has found scope in Eugene Thacker's analyses of life forms such as extremophiles, organisms that are adapted to survive and flourish in extreme conditions and environments ("extreme heat, cold, acidity, pressure, radioactivity..."). In a particularly attracting invitation to the problems this study aims to lay out, Thacker characterizes these species as "examples of living contradictions, a living instance of the inverse relationship between logic and life" (Thacker). Continuing, we can ask whether thinking happens as much by the formation of metals, as through ruminations in symbols within the monopoly of human representational thought. Similarly, there may be inborn measurement taking processes which are prior to detectors fabricated by human contrivance. Reformulated and given a sharper edge, the question may become, how anything can be thought about the ultimate condition of any anthropomorphism, before any anthropomorphism exists to assimilate it. As it will be seen presently, this is a question to which a renewed understanding of analogy

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, Jed Rasula draws attention to John Garth Wilkinson's physiology where abstraction is traced to human anatomy and "the heart is a self-supplying knot of affirmations" (Wilkinson qtd. in Rasula's *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration* 199).

might not be an altogether irrelevant response.

While today the "metaphysics" which gives some room to these questions has a particular prominence, helped among other things by a hospitable trend of media-archaeological as well as historical interventions that underline the prolongation of nature into technology and the abiotic into the human— with resultant revaluations of materials in their transmission capacities— it certainly is not so absolutely new that it cannot be said to iterate older questions from the philosophical tradition, beside the main line of *Naturphilosophie* that inspires Gilles Châtelet.

As it often happens, a likely precursor might be Hegel, who, not being satisfied with the Kantian ban on knowing things in themselves, set out to expose the knowability of—and concurrently the ways of knowing possessed by— what was not immediately amenable to human knowledge, by carrying out his manoeuvres on the limit, dislodging seemingly stable and impenetrable object positions in a progressive advance by the absolute. With the help of a versatile instrument such as an all-encompassing logic of negation, Hegel had no difficulties in attributing a logical valence to an animal approaching its food.

However, the non-propositional that accedes to thought today rarely takes the Hegelian trajectory and its human specific dignities, it seems to me, but acknowledged or not, follows a line that is closer to Alfred N. Whitehead's desire to mend what he diagnosed as the modern "bifurcation of nature", according to which the exclusive credit given by human subjectivity and mentality to itself about knowledge, thought and abstraction is only at the expense of a generally incoherent view of nature at large. Foreshadowed by a deservedly influential essay by William James that ushered "radical empiricism", Whitehead's perspective aims to show that the relation between consciousness and the things of the world that one has consciousness of is not as straightforward as this bifurcation would lead the moderns to believe, leaving unresolved problems like the status of a matter left for dead, and nature reduced to "a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly";<sup>3</sup> and the concomitant difficulty of conceiving how human nature and thought may hail from the same dead matter. In a way immediately bearing on the context of this paper, his constructions led Whitehead to revise the nature of abstractions in particular, taking them not as a prerogative of human thought, but a consequence shared by any real material interaction at large, giving it a scope which matches that of nonpropositional here: "Abstraction expresses nature's mode of interaction and is not merely mental. When it abstracts, thought is merely conforming

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<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and the modern world: Lowell lectures, 1925*, 56.

to nature—or rather, it is exhibiting itself as an element in nature."<sup>4</sup>

In a more direct way and following from Whitehead's productive engagements with romantic views of nature in Wordsworth and Shelley, the nonpropositional in thought today is perhaps also nourished by a culture of sympathy with other living things, and the earth at large, in the time of their global endangerment by long range consequences of human actions. Felt meanings and "shared sentience" are gaining deeper traction, and claim a space in a more expansive vision of "rationality" that admits its own blind spots. In that sense a Post-Romantic undercurrent exists in what one may call the contemporary investment in the nonpropositional. As it were, the assignability of thought, psychism and abstraction outside the human finds a necessary accompaniment in a heightened expression of solicitude for others. Therefore it is safe to claim that the nonpropositional and its speculative suspension of the rote answers to the question about the limits of logos, propositions and even "psychisms" do not completely rest on an ethically neutral foundation.

If an increasingly common point of attraction today across debates in anthropology, literary criticism, and discourse about the Anthropocene, is the staging of a problem similar to the Whiteheadian bifurcation, here the same debate is taken up not in terms of the divide between subject and object, and secondary qualities and primary, but rather on the level of a difference between propositional and representational thought, epitomized by the directed use of language or logic undertaken by human subjects, and a nonpropositional thought found in ostensibly extrasubjective and extraconsciousness domains like material and organic relations, ecosystems, plants, landscapes and non-human liaisons at large, which may presumably include functions in the humans as well.

This is not only about the external world serving as a scaffolding for limited human cognitive capacities either. The claims made exceed this type of attribution of "epistemic credit" to environment, an attribution which remains largely limited to a field of synchronic assemblies between humans and nonhumans. For a "migration of thought out of the brain" or a redistribution of credit to happen, the brain must remain a central point of reference in a field of simultaneity, however qualified this status may be. The temporal status of the nonpropositional on the other hand is to be understood not as a limited scaffolding for or coevolution with human thought in a field of simultaneity, but as involving precedence and creative supervenience in a field of successive phases as well. In other words, the nonpropositional seems to go deeper, further back, or laterally farther afield than the adjunct status the "extended mind"

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<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, Alfred North. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*, 26.

thesis bestows on the world in its rapport with human cognition.

This being so, one cannot say that what is at stake is a decentring of propositional thought or representation. Seeing in the nonpropositional only a form of antihumanist pathos modelled after the antisubjective pathos of yore would not be fair to this phenomenon. Since the various accounts that respond to the rift between the propositional and the nonpropositional in thought reconfigure the conceptions of each respective form of thought, more than a unilateral decentring, a vast recalibration of the linguistic in light of the living as well as abiotic materiality, and a recalibration of the living in the light of the human languages and logics which arose from it would be a more accurate description of the stakes involved. The implications go both ways, and open to scrutiny multiple modes of relation between the propositional and the nonpropositional: grounding, repetition, amplification, interruption and (re)enaction, besides the limited and more familiar mediations that are sublation and representation.

A nonpropositional scope for thought is often revealed by its claims to defamiliarize the criteria of what counts as immanent to thinking, and to critique the limited manners of exchange established with what is thereby excluded. As what is often excluded out of the domain of propositional thought is diverse, in the following metaphysics will not be the only discourse of resort, but will be supplemented by interrelated and selective inquiries in poetics, theories of information, the organism, as well as ontology proper. In terms of the field to be scanned the inquiry starts with poetically non-anthropomorphic formulations of ideation and knowledge to move on to the status of the organism and life. The justification of this eclecticism is that there is no one mode of breaking the exceptionalisms of propositional thinking; and many areas (e.g. the relation between logic and metaphysics, as well as the status of life vis-a-vis logic) that follow the established contours of propositional-nonpropositional distribution would leave behind new opportunities of communication and reshufflings after a renewed challenge by the nonpropositional.

#### POETIC KNOWLEDGE FROM WALLACE STEVENS' "NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION" TO GREGORY BATESON

Although it is true that certain contemporary philosophical tendencies enjoy a particularly noticeable link with the nonhumans and nonpropositional modes of thought (speculative realism, actor network theory and so on, to use some handy labels) poetry and literature at large have always served as an inspiration for this rapprochement. With regard to poetry in particular, here it is difficult not to agree with Jean Wahl, who thought that "if there is a metaphysical base, a hypophysical domain [...] if there is a massive torpor at the root of nature and sometimes at our root, it is

precisely there that a junction between poetry and metaphysics can be found".<sup>5</sup> If there is a massive torpor that is also a "thought" at the root of nature and at our root, poetry has always been there. Now, a poem that most favorably opens the case for a renegotiation between propositional and nonpropositional thought is Wallace Stevens' "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction". Fortunately it has repercussions for philosophical treatments of the questions involved too, witness the attention of Jean Wahl himself, from whom I borrow the nomenclature of propositional vs. nonpropositional.<sup>6</sup>

Stevens' poem opens up realms that one could call cosmological, and it does this in the light of a poetic inquiry into the existence and origin of certain primordial "ideas", not presupposing beforehand what deserves being called an idea. With an unorthodox—not quite Romantic—naturalist inspiration, Stevens' poem draws conclusions from the fact that there was a time in the history of the earth, when humans who are able to think ideas did not exist as such. Thus, his is a poetic genealogy of thinking, but also by implication, a fictional genealogy of matter thinking itself.

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source  
Of this idea nor for that mind compose  
A voluminous master folded in his fire.<sup>7</sup>

Starting by referring to "the inconceivable idea of the sun" and ruling out "an inventing mind as source" for it, Stevens's poem has a way of underscoring the saliences of objects and matter non-reducible to human thought, from within an engagement with this thought. There are materially instantiated ideas in nature which precede human ideas and inventions, and which the poem makes a point of acknowledging by renouncing a stance of jaded conceptual certainty and knowledge; apparently, the inconceivable idea it gestures toward, responds only to a "perceiving" of

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<sup>5</sup> Wahl, Jean Andre, *Human Existence and Transcendence*.

<sup>6</sup> Also cf. Philippe Descola

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*.

an as yet unspecified nature. Significantly, perhaps it is this renunciation that explains why the poem does not pursue the fact that sun as a physical system was a condition of possibility for all the minute irregularities and compromises responsible for the shape of humanity's existence. A mental flight of the mind which the contemporary paleontologist Neil Shubin is so good at making is not quite Stevens' way in this poem: "[...]with bodies composed of particles derived from the birth of stellar bodies and containing organs shaped by the workings of planets...hard not to see home everywhere".<sup>8</sup>

Instead, Stevens' poem turns to its own relation to this "idea of the sun" as a poem. Whereas Shubin is not talking about an idea when he situates the human in a vast domain of cosmologically ancestral conditions, Stevens' poem seems to cling to an operation immanent to ideas first, the only way it can turn toward its own limit: "the poem refreshes life so that we share, / for a moment, the first idea [...] It satisfies// Belief in an immaculate beginning...".<sup>9</sup> The poem and its reflective medium is needed, insofar as it reactualizes the beginning through a relation to its own limit, which relation serves as a proxy for another relation Stevens invokes: "life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation". The perceiving to which the poem refers at the beginning then, is determinate with regard to its relation to the *nascency* of life and world.

The reactualization of the poem is a consequential acknowledgment by the human of the preexistent to human life, which is a nonsense for human thought, even while this affirmation has its place in the human life and its capacity to make fictions: "the first idea was not our own...there was a muddy centre before we breathed. / There was a myth before the myth began, / venerable and articulate and complete" (Stevens). Perhaps, Stevens' poem would not have the same force if it was merely about the sublime unthinkability of the preexistent to human; its challenge lies in the way it stresses the ambiguous articulation between the myth before myth and myth; imagining the necessity of a language and intelligibility that is unhomely, the only key of which however, is given by a homelier logic which occludes it at the same time. Only by occluding its origins in clouds and sundriven transmutations of the earth, and its openness to life's strange relations, can human language affirm these origins, only in the propositional (myth) a sense of the nonpropositional (myth before myth) that must have given birth to it, can be conceived.

In other words, the poem gives a chance to propositional human thought to conceive and feel its own improbability, and capture the value immanent to the fact of

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<sup>8</sup> Shubin, Neil. *The Universe Within: A Scientific Adventure*.

<sup>9</sup> Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*.

its existence: "the poem, through candor, brings back a power again//that gives a candid kind to everything".<sup>10</sup> As suggested by the unlikely *repetition* of the poem which "brings back a power again", there is a way the propositional sprang and continues to spring from the nonpropositional, only offering meaning by reanimating faint traces of this descendancy and opening; or it can only reanimate these traces, when it is able to engage that limit and improbability at its origin and display that candor, in the relations it establishes. The result is a strange reversal: in a sense that leaves no room for idealist usurpation, the propositional accedes to its own nonanthropomorphic inclusiveness and openness to life's strange relation, while in a nonfinalist sense, the nonpropositional starts to entertain a relation to its own determinacies—"venerable and articulate"—which must after all have ended up in the supposedly tidier orders and ideas of the propositional and human thought in general.

Stevens talks about a supreme fiction that must have been embedded in the generative yet articulate dynamics of the sun, the earth, and weather phenomena as "ideas". Seemingly indifferent, supremely indifferent events before the arrival of human ideas and conceptions, setting the ground for these conceptions too, without necessarily being for these conceptions' sake. Along the way a generalization of the idea of fiction also occurs, shifting from limited human prerogatives to a capacity shared with a host of material processes and relations.

Changing the focus from a broken axis of emergences— myth before myth to myth— to this generalizing thrust itself, it is now possible to turn to Jean Wahl's own sense of the nonpropositional. Instead of opening up fiction's propositional provenance to dispute and corroding wonder, Wahl's own favored target is the idea of knowledge. What could be his "notes toward a supreme knowledge" are articulated apropos the French poet Paul Claudel: "Knowledge is not for Claudel, something which characterizes the human; for him, as it is for diverse contemporary philosophers like Alexander, Whitehead, Heidegger, it is necessary to generalize the idea of knowledge. A color, ventures Claudel, knows its complementary color. And light knows the eye or resembles it [...] Thus knowledge is formation and information".<sup>11</sup>

Apart from his characteristically broad and liberal vision of the themes shared between the likes of Whitehead and Heidegger, Wahl suggests a comparison between the cybernetic ideas of information of his day and the franchise Claudel gives to material processes for knowing. To note an important nuance, Wahl's understanding of information is not equivalent to a code or message separable from a process of material

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Wahl, *L'Expérience Métaphysique*, 130.



formation. Rather, it seems to be a matter of giving credit for "knowledge" to material phenomena often consigned to being secondary qualities by virtue of their exclusive accommodation in human thought. Bypassing the category of cause—often locked in the position of a Kantian category giving sense to a deterministic nature— and sidelining the primacy of the category of energy, (in)formation suggests itself as a mediation between nonpropositional knowing—that of the color's, the light's and the eye's— and the propositional one formulable in human signs. In this fashion, Wahl's knowledge echoes Stevens' fiction, which restores determinacy and proto-logical order to the clouds, the muddy center and the sun, and at the same time a non-idealist and nonanthropomorphic expansiveness to human fictions.

Commenting further, Wahl writes "Knowledge is the registration of the real rapports existing between things...Knowledge, it's the fact of completing oneself in extension: the sea knows the ship; the axe and oak both know the rock; the fire the food which it cooks, the metal which it smelts [...] we are within a universal relation where each thing knows the other".<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, Wahl's example of a fire knowing the food is far removed from the presupposition of a knowing in the image of a representing consciousness, witness the allusion placed in the well-chosen word, "extension", lifted from its Cartesian provenance and repurposed. Extension after all, even when taken in a Cartesian sense, is fully material. Wahl's generalization of knowledge rather seems to have its basis on the selective grasp between mutually sensitive materials and processes: it is not the relatively indifferent coupling of fire and rock which is the exemplary pairing of this expansive vision of knowledge, but pairings like fire and food as well as the sea and ship, with their consequential couplings.

If material forms and acts of reciprocal information offer one strategy in the conceptualization of a knowledge that includes the nonpropositional, another strategy for Wahl seems to be the category of vibration. In his further reflections on Claudel, the philosopher presents the medium of the universal relation between things as a "community of movement", gesturing toward a vision of a vast vibrational milieu after the poet's own proclivities. As Claudel himself speculates, "it (vibration) is the very 'element,' the radical symbol that is the essential constituent of all life. The vibration of our brain is the bubbling of life's wellspring, the emotion of matter in contact with divine unity, whose ascendancy constitutes our very personality".<sup>13</sup> With a Catholic inspiration which informs this vision of a *continuum* between the material and the neurological, Claudel seems to envision the nonpropositional and propositional

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Claudel, *Knowing the East*, 98.

uniting, fanning out and differing as modes of vibration, which is like a proto-knowledge. However, this shifts the criterion of generalization from selective grasps and formational impacts to a scale and ubiquity indifferent to them: basing the communication between human and nonhuman forms of knowledge on vibration, rather than selective impact and sensitization, requires a different type of constraint. Here the sense of a more inclusive vibrational constraint, the constraint of a tactile flickering, grounds knowledge as well as propositional thought, resulting in a resurrected alchemy which gives matter credit for thinking.

To point out the main difference between the two distinct attempts at nonpropositional thought made in these passages, the first one seems to expand insights which seem to have an unacknowledged technical inspiration to domains outside technicity, whereas the second one courts a greater degree of generality thanks to the omnipresence of vibration as a natural phenomenon: On the one hand the constraint of selective impact, on the other the more generic constraint of vibration. Overall, Wahl's examples from Claudel, like Stevens' poem, are significant for the space they allow to relations and compositions maintained by strictly abiotic existents. Moreover, in each case poetry emerges as a privileged domain of discourse for the avowal of a sense of continuum, thanks to the "strange relation" that opens when the propositional is not taken as its own source and principle but treated in its relation to antecedent and underpinning forms of nonpropositional interaction.

However, a question seemingly left in suspension by these two works, Stevens' as well as Claudel's, is whether there is an analogy at play which grounds the two forms of approach to the nonpropositional, fictional and epistemic; and if the thinkability of what is normally resistant to human thought is ensured through a procedure like analogy familiar to logical thought, what may be the best characterization of such an analogy. Is it importing certain definite relations instanced in a given a domain—say a meteorology—to serve as a model for the relations in another, teasing method from matter, through another but occluded method? While this would mean that the poets and the authors involved are not postulating an unaccountable mystical union which embeds the propositional mind in nature and the natural tendencies of growth in the mind, by leaving analogy unacknowledged, one would risk taking it as a reified form of logical procedure without exploring the metaphysical conditions or baggage which it may bring. As Gregory Bateson seems to have believed, the conditions and manners of knowing, and by implication the nature of analogy, is not indifferent to the discoveries about nature at large : "From the manner of the search, we can read what sort of discovery the searcher may thereby reach [...] what is my answer to the question of the nature of knowing? I surrender to the belief that my knowing is a small part of a wider

integrated knowing that knits the entire biosphere or creation".<sup>14</sup>

### ORGANIC THOUGHT

There needs to be a further advancement on the blandly generic affirmation that human thought belongs to a nature which antecedes and holds the conditions for its creative emergence. The rest of this partial survey will rely on three headings, responding respectively to the question of the organism, the status of semiotics and finally the contributions of traditional ontological questions to the configuration of the nonpropositional. After questions about the physical order at large, plied with the resources of poesis and fabulation about antecedent conditions of an ancestral *phusis*, now the question comes to the specificity of the organic, or the possibility of considering the organism itself as the locus of an inborn manner of knowing or abstraction at large. Strangely enough, defending the claim of the organism to a legitimate manner of abstraction, poses no less substantial difficulties. The association of bodily functions with an opaque or immediate form of existence, or an "in-itself" without the capacity of reflection, is entrenched, and one might suggest, rightfully so, considering the largely nonconscious and involuntary character of the operations involved. As it were, the organism poses a particular challenge to the nonpropositional extension of thought through its very proximity and heightened contrast with formal abstraction, as well as a human language fatefully understood as a superaddition to bare life.

From another angle, the brain is a part of the organism, and one that receives exclusive credit for a wide range of abstractions, formal and otherwise. Nevertheless, stopping at affirming the belonging of the brain --as the "seat" of thought and language-- to the organism would make for a weak sense of nonpropositional thinking that would only reiterate the Cartesian division between thought and extension.<sup>15</sup> To be exact, it would bring the risk of thinking the jointure between life and thought as something receptive to "privative" analyses, situating propositional thought once again as the index of human exception and superiority to other forms of life.<sup>16</sup> At best, the conception of the brain as the appointed and sovereign locus of thought, refuses to see a problem in the possibility of a nonpropositional thought. What is required is a conception of the body as a complex arrangement comprehending functions of nonneural denomination; in other words, to carry speculation toward the possibility of a "logos" that would shift the partitions between the neural center and functions often

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<sup>14</sup> Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. 86-88.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Wilson; and Giovanna Colombetti's *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance, David Farrel Krell, *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life*

called "peripheral".

With response to the problem delineated in this fashion, the possibility contained in the term "organology" may suggest itself as a tentative solution, if it is taken to refer to an organ or organic function not only as an object, but as the source of a certain intelligibility and intelligence. There are organic stabilizations in being that have to do with parsing different individuals—as in the immune system—making distinctions, communicating among each other, and in certain instances going "wrong". In this sense, the organological and its primacy over the neural-nonneural hierarchy may hold a certain key to conceiving a nonpropositional tailored for the organism. The organological gambit in this sense also brings home the fact that the identification of a nonpropositional thought often requires and makes itself known by a certain defamiliarization of the traditional understanding of thought.

Elizabeth Wilson has recently made a version of this move of defamiliarization in her exploration of a possible thought carried out by the organism itself, within the context of what she calls a "gut feminism".<sup>17</sup> In her discussion of what she calls "hysterical materialization"<sup>18</sup> implying a clinical dimension of organology—where the clinical corresponds to a context where norms are up for grabs—Wilson makes an inroad to a nonpropositional form of thought. In a reading of Sandor Ferenczi's unconventional perspective on bodily symptoms of hysteria, which takes them to be shifting somatic embodiments with a logic and psychism of their own abreast with a phylogenetic unconscious, she seems to find a possibility of generalization: "The thinking that an organism enacts when its cognitive, rational, symbolizing structures have been destroyed should provide an opportunity to reconsider the nature of thinking in the usual sense. [...] The vicissitudes of ingestion and vomiting are complex thinking enacted organically: bingeing and purging are the substrata themselves attempting to question, solve, control, calculate, protect, and destroy".<sup>19</sup>

Drawing implications, the consequences of the defamiliarizing extension that is the nonpropositional are very clear here. Here one is not only negating a disembodied perspective that fits a caricaturally banal, but partially truthful version of Descartes; not only the restrictive identification of thinking with cognitive problem solving is questioned, it is also suggested that what the organs like the throat and the stomach can do for us and on their own, may be forms of thinking as legitimate as step by step cognitive questioning, and problem solving: "organic thought".

While this gesture involving a clinical embodiment of organological speculation

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<sup>17</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth A. *Gut Feminism*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

may not be sufficient to accommodate human propositional thought and nonpropositional organic thought as kinds along a veritable continuum, it at least offers an alternative to more traditional bifurcations between the cognitive and the living. For one thing, the organism finds itself entangled in certain necessary negotiations that determine the interface between life as a condition of human logic and "logic" as a latecomer on the ground of life's strange relations. This is an interface where pathology and anomaly meet truth, and a form of "muddy" or non-propositional judgment may be expressed in a body's sympathies and antipathies. Put otherwise, it may be possible to make a stronger claim for a nonpropositional thinking evident in the organism, based on this new and defamiliarized sense of thinking. Compared to the unilateral association of thinking and cognition with the unproblematic neural capacities of the organism, this certainly registers an advance toward a problem of the nonpropositional.

Most notably, here it is possible to find a departure for conceiving the relation between the nonpropositionally organic and propositional human thought on a mode other than superaddition and sublation. When one establishes this relation as one that connects abstraction to abstraction, rather than an impoverished concretion to the richness of signification, it simultaneously becomes more difficult to commit to a subtractive conception of life deduced from an image of the already propositional human thought. To be concise, the organological marks a theoretical moment or sense of a relation between life and thought that is not equivalent to the one between prelogical and logical.

### SEMIOTICS AND LIFE

If one route of introducing a nonpropositional thought in the organic is the organological, as exemplified by Wilson's understanding of hysterical materializations, another passes through a thought of semiosis as an expansive activity. It could be said that these two routes have a shared reliance-- implicit or explicit--on a model of amplification or relay of intelligence. Thus, the organological gambit of amplification, or the status of the organism as a domain of nonpropositional logics also trails along the possibility of a more extensive conception of semiosis, insofar as it may testify to a thought beyond the human.

Concomitantly, the next moment of the rapprochement and all round recalibration pursued in this essay is a consideration of semiosis or symbolic activity at large. For a strategically informative case, one may consult the work of the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn. In agreement with the direction of semiotic study called "biosemiotics", Kohn brings to his anthropological work a semiotic approach that radically qualifies the exceptional status of the human with regard to the reading and production of signs, or

their employment in general. For him "all life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive".<sup>20</sup> In this conviction Kohn is partly inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce's highly versatile generic scheme of "representation", which conceals implications for non-humans as well. Kohn writes, "representation is something both more general and more widely distributed than human language", thereby recasting the usual role given to this term. What this essay means by the nonpropositional then corresponds to Kohn's unorthodox—guided by Peirce— use of the term "representation", whereas the propositional is human language and the specific symbol making capacities it involves.

A foundational move for Kohn's intervention is one that is familiar now thanks to the previous discussion of Wilson on organism, which is a defamiliarization of what is usually understood by semiotic competence: "The challenge is to defamiliarize the arbitrary sign whose peculiar properties are so natural to us because they seem to pervade everything that is in any way human and anything else about which humans can hope to know".<sup>21</sup> Echoing the strange relations coming to expression in Stevens' poetry, Kohn bases his approach on his ethnographic field work with Runa people and their specific relations to the forest where they dwell, noting how "these relations amplify certain properties of the world, and this amplification can infect and affect our thinking about the world".<sup>22</sup>

If the arbitrary sign as the prerogative of the human is defamiliarized, admitting to a deep complicity with morphologies and expressions found in an ecosystem at large (whether plant or animal), Kohn seems to think, then one gains a foothold to address "what signs look like beyond the human", thereby also scrambling the usual coordinates of the assignability of thought. To Kohn's credit he does not follow the long lasting and widespread reflex of responding to this problem with some narrative of human superiority and overcoming of immediacy, managing to avoid introducing hasty hierarchies and intimations of unilinear complexification. The problem is re-thinking the relations of precedence along with the tangly and messy coexistence between semiosis as such and human semiosis, without resorting to these familiar narratives.

Like Wallace Stevens, Kohn does not believe in an absolute separation between human thought and the sign beyond the human. Instead, he conceives the relation as an "amplification", implying both prolongation and qualitative/novelty-introducing change, without assuming the "supersession" of the nonhuman thought in human thought. Kohn puts the point thus: "Are we forever trapped inside our linguistically and culturally mediated ways of thinking? My answer is no: a more complete

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<sup>20</sup> Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

understanding of representation, which can account for the ways in which that exceptionally human kind of semiosis grows out of and is constantly in interplay with other kinds of more widely distributed representational modalities, can show us a more productive and analytically robust way out of this persistent dualism".<sup>23</sup>

Kohn's semiotic approach is undoubtedly exciting and constitutes a vital provocation to thinking the belonging of human sign competence to a speculatively vaster realm of expression. In a great example of this extension, Kohn discusses the elongated snout of an anteater —thus a morphological characteristic— as a sign: "a giant anteater is a sign, what it is—its particular configuration, the fact, for example, that it has an elongated, as opposed to some other shape of snout—cannot be understood without considering what it is about, namely, the relevant environment that it increasingly comes to fit through the dynamic I've just described".<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, here a certain question seems to emerge, concerning whether a semiotic framework may become a necessary and informative addition to the traditional description of the snout, which would be a language of evolution and organogenesis. Specifically, the question would concern the nature of the relation between adaptation and semiotic surrogacy (whether this relation would be a complementarity or hierarchy, for instance). By dint of offering a reinscription of functional adaptation, Kohn's account would perhaps find a particular challenge in the status of the human brain with its superimposed levels of functional adaptive "signs" and willingly deployed propositional signs in human language.

Similarly, one cannot but think that in the general reconfiguration of the relation between human symbolization (the propositional) and representation at large (the nonpropositional), there always remains an asymmetry, leaving one side less open to manifestation. The achievements of human thought in clarity can be pushed back toward a muddy center more easily than the venerable and articulate nature of the inhuman can be demonstrated, if not felt. When it comes to insisting on the proximity of human thought to "the muddy center", it is possible to find some consensus: "Language does not so much attempt to (and fail to attempt to) capture life but rather enacts it, for us humans, in a certain way".<sup>25</sup> In comparison with this inscription of language in terms of life, the reverse scenario is always more difficult: when life as such is to be reinscribed in terms of semiosis and logic, it creates some natural resistance that human logic cannot create for life, as it is, unambiguously, life. In this sense, the concept of amplification works with only a certain partial validity, by which

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>25</sup> Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*.

amplification is necessarily judged from the point of view of the already "amplified" human order with access to codified symbolization. It may be that the limit to conceiving a nonpropositional thought is not only the effective limit of the longstanding primacy of the propositional, but a certain tact as to what is truly not to be thought, and worth preserving as the non-signifying.

### ONTOLOGY BETWEEN THE UNIVOCAL AND THE ANALOGICAL

In the scope of this essay so far, traditional questions of being, becoming as well as the relation between being and nothingness have only found implicit and passing deployment as possible inroads into a thinking of the nonpropositional. This section aims to remedy that, by returning in effect to the Pre-Socratic problem of the co-belonging of physis, logos and being as well as extending it in the direction of the more specific question of analogy. The main problem here is a reconsideration of the benefits of certain ambiguous cognitive structures or tendencies to structuration, in dramatizing the propositional itself in its emergence out of the nonpropositional. Among these tendencies, pattern generation and analogy will furnish immediate examples here; in other words these forms of thought serve as occasions for a reprise of the statement of Whitehead mentioned above, according to which "when it abstracts, thought is merely conforming to nature".

Heidegger's work is rightfully known as the most significant modern renewal of traditional ontological problems, yet for the purposes of this essay, his work is also hampered by a perspective that is centered on the Dasein and its privileged relation to what he variously treats as "unconcealment" and "world disclosure". The question of the living along with its scientific thematization have a singularly labored status in Heidegger's work, thanks to his conspicuous and not always successful insistence in subordinating these to the primacy of a framework provided by "Being", however radical it may ultimately be. It would not be wrong to claim that, thanks to a centring on Dasein, there are structural limits to Heidegger's discourse which make it waver between human exceptionality—without humanism—and various sporadic advances toward a less anthropocentric eventality. Therefore his work here is relevant mainly for its shortcomings in living up to an affirmation of the kind Merleau-Ponty on his part felt compelled to make, and defines the stance of this paper as well: "An ontology that avoids mentioning nature shuts itself away in the incorporeal and, for this very reason, offers a fantastical image of mankind, of the mind, of history"<sup>26</sup>

However, the very same obstinacy at work in Heidegger's writings works in ways

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<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty qtd. in *Châtelet*, 102.



that may help clearing a place for nonpropositional mode of thought. This is the case when Heidegger acknowledges a place for analogy in thinking the difference and co-belonging of logos and being. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger presented a characteristic etymological aperçu on the nondiscursive provenance of logos, and by implication analogy: "[...] logos does not originally mean discourse, saying. What the word means has no immediate relation to language".<sup>27</sup> Instead, he suggested, the more original meaning was something along the lines of "interrelation", "relationship" or more resonantly, a "gathering". Therefore, Heidegger treated analogy as a rare case of a splicing between the nonpropositional and the propositional: "In the expression 'analogy' (correspondence) we even find both meanings side by side: the original meaning of logos as 'interrelation' or 'relationship' and its meaning as 'language' or 'discourse'"<sup>28</sup>

Thus, in a way that has been anticipated before, analogy may have a key role to play in ontology's own treatment of the differences and relays between the propositional and the nonpropositional. Analogy here spreads the folds of being, creating zones of continuum between human thinking and processes of vital or material genesis. In a very precise sense, analogy absorbs the (onto)logical properties of what can otherwise well be called univocity, if this word really implies the following: "being pure saying and pure event univocity brings in contact the inner surface of language... with the outer surface of Being...".<sup>29</sup> More properly, univocity intends the ontological univalence which makes all that exists exist in the same "sense", whether they be a god or a leaf. In the following I hope to offer an elaboration of Deleuze's statement that is not necessarily very faithful to its context in his discourse, where it is articulated with a thought of a transcendental embodied in topological models. Particularly, my intention is benefiting from the idea of univocity in situating the analogical as *a* form of thought that allows the nonpropositional to come forward (in the sense a being comes forward) in the recursions of human propositional thought; in correlation, analogy is to be treated more under the aspect of an act rather than a representation.

Underpinning the recursive emergence of nonpropositional within the domain of human thinking is a postulate that necessarily relies on the idea of "phylogenesis" and its associated time scale.<sup>30</sup> The role of nature –which Merleau-Ponty designates as a

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<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, Martin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 180. With some license here the medieval terminological distinction and contrast between analogy and univocity is thus relativized and disregarded to some extent.

<sup>30</sup> Phylogenesis has an important place in Wilson's previously discussed foray into an "organic thought".

mandate for ontological thought-- is played not least by phylogenesis, involving the scheme of a lineage and scale of generation not amenable to direct conscious experience or propositional conceptualization. As Fernand Deligny wrote in a different context, "as far as the human is concerned, species memory, under the grip of symbolic domestication, is unexplored, and apparently unexplorable. It was ages ago that language cut to the quick of the common itself, at the beginning of time, or almost".<sup>31</sup> In this light, the task becomes the cultivation of a sensitivity to the coexistence and reciprocal determination between different temporalities: on the one hand propositional language with its undeniable step-by-step logical excellences and powers of transfer, on the other hand, more ancient attunements to correlations, patterns, concretions and analogies with a broader psychic basis; on the one hand the challenges phylogenetic time poses to intuition and on the other the very different challenges found in the temporalities of pattern recognition, as well as the nascencies involved in the real time of actual analogies. Without austerity, and yet without unscrutinized immediacy, a sense of formal genesis may go a long way and may be a real chance of transfigured survival for the Parmenidean unity of being and thought.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, categories of nascency and genesis have a long history, especially in their various intersections with the differently coded relation between finite and infinite; one that includes and goes further back than earlier Romantic equivalencies between thought structures like imagination and nature. Particularly, one may associate this emphasis on the possibility of an experience of the nonpropositional as an experience of phylogenesis with a register often designated as meontological, in the sense of the valorization of nothingness, unfinishedness and absence as productive principles in their own right. A certain merit of a meontological resurgence in this sense, ranging from ideas of human anthropological unfinishedness to affirmative visions of permanent neurological immaturity, is that whatever opening to outside it affords to thought, it is never on the level of substance but rather in terms of the modest but precise level of a schema of relations. An ontology abreast with the juncture between ontogenetic thought processes and vast phylogenetic conditionings needs to incorporate a meontological dynamism. This condition brings me to the final stage of this extended inquiry, which is a discussion of Leo Bersani's recent foray into cosmology and phylogenesis entitled "Far Out".

In this essay, Bersani establishes what he calls "correspondences" between processes of heterogeneous scale like cosmological generation, the trajectory of human

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<sup>31</sup> Deligny, Fernand. *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, 222.

<sup>32</sup> For Parmenidean unity's notable restatements see Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*, Gilbert Simondon's *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, and Michael Marder's *Grafts*.

phylogenesis and finally the self-referential level of an analogical thought operation. In other words, his reflections have a parallel claim on that zone of complementarity between metaphysics and logic, if analogy is taken to be the legitimate logical procedure which it is. For Bersani, the establishment of a new tie between propositional human thought and nonpropositional existence has a very pointed temporal form: if analogy keeps alive the trace of the nonpropositional in the propositional, it does this because it enlivens a "memory" akin to a species memory. Bersani has more in common with Elizabeth Wilson in this regard, whose engagement with Ferenczi's unorthodox speculations also makes some emphasis on the presently felt phylogenetic traces shaping contemporary psychic economies.

Naturally, one of the most striking aspects of these connections is the way analogy is singled out as a privileged delegate for the nonpropositional in the field of propositional human thought, bringing to mind Bateson's earlier specifications around "method". For Bersani, analogy simultaneously puts into play two different but obscurely interrelated scales of temporality, spanning at once a present "in the making" and the deep past of cosmology. The nascent and unfinished process of making analogies takes on a potentially cosmological import, putting implicit emphasis on a different sense of negativity: "It is as if we were at the moment of similitudes just emerging—unfinished, unrealized".<sup>33</sup> There is a way the negative is reconfigured to invest a process of material generation not from the side of a subsequent idealist standpoint, but from the side of whatever being found in *statu nascendi*. It refers to a state of being unfinished and "toward" without the finality of a state of arrival.

Bersani's provocative assertions about analogy in thought and being are outlined against such a background of assumptions. Departing from the physicist Lawrence Krauss's statement that "every atom in your body was once inside a star that exploded"<sup>34</sup> and his accompanying bid to replace Christian myth with science, Bersani makes a series of vertical and vertiginous connections, linked step by step with each other:

To engage in this activity of positing uncertain likeness is to expand the field of being. The relational is no longer constrained by the perhaps always illusory certitudes of similarity. In the specific case we have been looking at, the oddity lies not only in the unprovable yet possible status of a widespread religious myth as deriving from mnemonic traces of our cosmic origins, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, in the mental move that makes the connection (however

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<sup>33</sup> Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> A closely related version of which we encountered in a previously quoted statement by Neil Shubin.

lightly and in passing). The cosmological theory establishes our derivation from stellar atoms, while the analogy between a savior's death and the death of unimaginably ancient stars suggests the ease with which the human mind can, both in scientific theory and religious fable, articulate its affinity with the nonhuman. This affinity reverses Cartesian dogma: *res cogitans* corresponds ontologically with *res extensa*. Our connective field extends far beyond and before the human. We can think like matter, or perhaps more accurately, matter thinks us. To use like in this way invites a reformulation that dispenses with it. A likeness is absorbed into a congruence, or community, of being.<sup>35</sup>

Through a complex series of communicating intermediaries, Bersani seems to be suggesting that nonhuman matter and its incommensurable temporal scales can nevertheless take the form of a far-flung analogy in terms of human thinking. The charged separation and plurality of matter, finds a congruence with the charged separations and pluralities of analogy. In a way that recalls Stevens' poem moreover, this is a vision of an ancestral and nonpropositional absolute coming to manifestation thanks to the mediating capacity of the spontaneity of poetic human analogies. Bersani invites us to consider analogy as the space of a relation beyond relation, where matter juts into and finds convoluted expression in human thought.

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Thanks to its multiple tributaries in a new vision of organicism, ontology and semiotics the survey has reached a point where the bifurcation of the propositional and nonpropositional have been traversed from both directions: whereas loci like the organs, the muddy center of the sun, vibration as well as an anteater snout have been discussed in their capacities of articulacy, human thought itself has been caught out in the elusive avowals of its "far out" kinship with stellar matter and transformations of the species.

Especially in the second direction, analogy has played a determining role. Being a part of propositional human thought, analogy has also turned out to avow a sense and "oddity" that makes no sense for human propositional thought: that part in analogy which is like a jutting of ancestral cosmic matter. However, a host of other expressive categories may be equally suitable to carry out similar adjustments between the propositional and the nonpropositional. Some of these also enjoy a specific proximity to poetic thought: mimesis, rhythm and gesture perhaps await their own eulogies for "far out" negotiation.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 82.

One thing the essay has not considered is the information paradigm which similarly establishes a rapprochement between human languages and codes, and not-fully-human or nonpropositional structures like genes. In fact there is an influential lineage in biology and cybernetics for which the "book of life" still constitutes an illustrative trope, thereby offering a deceptive parallel with the objective of this survey. For the reason of the anthropocentric and humanist underpinning of this trope however, which inevitably glamorizes the human decoding capacities, it has not been brought into the ambit of this discussion, which tried at least to take the nonreducibility of life and the nonpropositional more seriously.

These ideas have the merits of defamiliarizing human thought and checking the hubris attending any sense of the exceptional nature of human thinking, by showing it to be impregnated with the nonhuman. Moreover, differently from other theoretical evocations of a thinkable nonreducible to human thought, such as the one that is offered by Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism, or Eugene Thacker's rehabilitations of mysticism, most of the examples discussed here allow a greater scope for a relation beyond relation which brings the nonhuman into the aesthetic presence of the human, without resorting to negating supersession, nor anthropomorphism. In fact, especially with respect to Meillassoux, instead of singling out the austerity of mathematical formalization as the only means of thought to register the traces of its obscurely and incommensurably ancestral conditions, the examples give a greater weight to poetry and the aesthetic at large.

On the other hand however, there are also some insurmountable problems in completing the intuition of the community of the propositional and the nonpropositional. First the necessity to preserve what is inassimilable to anthropomorphism, and next a wariness concerning a logic of resemblance insinuating itself to analogies dedicated to indexing a nonhuman thought, persistently create problems for envisioning a thought beyond the human. Relation can only be established beyond the relation, in the incompleteness of the intuition.

In fact, one wonders whether —given a single-minded will to pursue the nonpropositional and carry it to its extreme conclusion— one may end up with a situation where abstract entities like truth and knowledge may get so much "naturalized" that nature ridden with so many ideas may need renaturalization in the image of an unthinking and mute obtuseness, a back and forth swing that may also include a re-idealization of ideas. At least, a necessary conclusion of these arguments is a sense that one cannot endlessly relativize the distinction between the propositional human thought and the physics of thinking inherent in the nonpropositional without

simultaneously occluding the invention that human propositional thought constitutes.

Finally, perhaps one of the most significant faultlines that can inform this attempt comes from a fact that is very commonplace, and thus a bit alien to the grand cosmological scale that stamped the last part. Thinking has a special relation with difficulty. One does not have to reach back to Heidegger to know that feeling of not having thought until, one fine day, an entire system of presuppositions is turned on its head, and one really starts "thinking". If it behooves one to take this experience seriously, which has troubled not a few people from Antonin Artaud to Scott Fitzgerald to Gilles Deleuze, another significant rift appears: the human is not exceptional for the way it can take credit for being able to think, but it may be exceptional for the way it cannot take credit for being able to think. But one never knows about rocks and roots, if one believes Isabelle Stengers, channelling Whitehead: "but what do you understand about rocks or roots, little man?"<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Stengers, Isabelle. "Whitehead's Account of the Sixth Day".

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