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## Theodicy across Scales

### Hemsterhuis's *Alexis* and the Dawn of Romantic Cosmism

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#### ABSTRACT

This essay re-reads François Hemsterhuis's *Alexis* as a post-Copernican cosmic theodicy that prefigures a central nexus of concerns in Early German Romanticism. This theodicy is cross-scalar, in that it functions across three disparate scales: the history of global humanity, the geo-cosmic history of the Earth, and the broader processuality of the universe. From the perspective of this cross-scalar entanglement, I reconstruct Hemsterhuis's vision of the ages of the world and his theodical narrative of the golden age, the Fall, and the cosmic destiny of humanity. Additionally, I offer a counter-reading of this destiny through the story of the Moon in *Alexis*, and through the contingency, uselessness, and cosmic failure that the Moon embodies.

*Keywords:* cosmism, theodicy, philosophy of history, the golden age, contingency, cosmic failure

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Aufsatz wird François Hemsterhuis' *Alexis* als eine postkopernikanische kosmische Theodizee gedeutet, die eine Reihe der zentralen frühromantischen Problemstellungen vorwegnimmt. Diese Theodizee ist skalenübergreifend in dem Sinne, dass sie auf drei Ebenen zugleich funktioniert: der globalen Geschichte der Menschheit, der geokosmischen Geschichte der Erde und der allumfassenden Prozessualität des Universums. Aus der Perspektive dieser skalenübergreifenden Verflechtung rekonstruiert der Aufsatz die Hemsterhuis'sche Vision der Weltalter und seine Erzählung vom goldenen Zeitalter, dem Sündenfall und dem kosmischen Schicksal des Menschen. Zudem entwickelt der Aufsatz eine Gegenlesart dieses Schicksals durch die Figur des Mondes in *Alexis* und durch die Zufälligkeit, die Nutzlosigkeit und das kosmische Scheitern, die durch den Mond verkörpert werden.

*Stichwörter:* Kosmismus, Theodizee, Geschichtsphilosophie, das goldene Zeitalter, Kontingenz, kosmisches Scheitern

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“Die Welt bedarf keiner Erlösung [The world  
requires no redemption].”  
—Hans-Joachim Mähl on the Hemsterhuisian  
universe<sup>1</sup>

This essay offers an exegetical and speculative re-reading of François Hemsterhuis’s dialogue *Alexis* as a post-Copernican cosmic theodicy that anticipates a central nexus of concerns in the early German Romantic thinking of the human, the Earth, and the universe.<sup>2</sup> My approach here is less to trace the specific influence of this dialogue on individual Romantic figures than to discern a certain conceptual thread in Hemsterhuis that opens onto the Romantic ideas about inhabiting immanently the infinity, alienness, and contingency of the post-Copernican (Keplerian-Newtonian) universe.

Just like the Romantic project of universal *poiesis*, Hemsterhuisian thought, I want to suggest, is *cross-scalar*, in that it seeks to think across, and to bring conceptually together, three disparate temporal scales: the history of humanity across the globe; the geo-cosmic history of the planet Earth; and the broader processuality of the universe. I will be calling these scales, respectively, “the global,” “the planetary,” and “the cosmic.” From this perspective, the eighteenth century was arguably the last great age of cross-scalar thinking, and Romanticism its last great exemplification.<sup>3</sup> Only today, with the emergence of “the planet” as a separate category and scale in the Anthropocene discourse, and with the rise of discourses of cosmic exploration and existential risk is this kind of cross-scalar thinking really making a return. These discourses, furthermore, raise again some of the burning questions of Romantic theodicy: can the history of global humanity, with its negativity and evils, be justified as somehow “good” or “useful” from a planetary or cosmic standpoint? Does humanity have a cosmic destiny—and no less importantly, what does one mean in this regard by “humanity,” and who is the subject of this destiny? What is the position and significance of the human mind and history on a de-centered planet amidst the infinite and contingent universe?

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Joachim Mähl, *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters im Werk des Novalis*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 281. The research in this article was funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany’s Excellence Strategy in the context of the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* – EXC 2020 – Project ID 390608380.

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I speak simply of “Romanticism” to designate the German *Frühromantik*.

<sup>3</sup> I offer a reading of Romanticism as cross-scalar in Kirill Chepurin, “Novalis and the Schlegels,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Poststructuralism*, ed. Tilottama Rajan and Daniel Whistler (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

These questions stand at the center of Hemsterhuis's cosmist thinking. As I will show, the theodical narrative of the golden age, the Fall, and the cosmic future of humanity that he constructs in *Alexis*, as well as the logic of periodization advanced in this narrative and the conception of poetry that underlies it, all function programmatically across the above three scales. The interplay of these scales itself serves a theodical purpose: to construct a narrative of human history of a kind that would reconfigure post-Copernican cosmic contingency as conducive to the development of humanity and justify the evils of the modern human condition as demonstrating the infinity of human nature and its cosmic destiny. Hemsterhuis offers a singular cosmist model for theodicy—a model that is highly modern, despite the classical setting he chooses for *Alexis*, and highly synthetic, combining astronomy, poetry, philosophy, and history in a way that would appeal to the ambition of Romanticism—in its projects of universal system and universal history—to re-mediate poetically the entire universe.

All of this is not to claim that Hemsterhuis single-handedly determines the logics of Romantic theodicy or Romantic cosmism. Rather, Hemsterhuis's *Alexis* should be seen, alongside texts such as Herder's *Ideas for a Philosophy of History of Humanity*, as a key carrier of the more-than-human energies of the pre-Revolutionary decades and a conceptual laboratory in which, under the storm and stress of these energies, certain pre-Revolutionary tendencies of Enlightenment thought are distilled, amplified, and transmuted before they are picked up by the Romantics as, in a sense, already their own or of their own time—leading the young Novalis, inspired by Hemsterhuis, to proclaim theodically: “There is absolutely nothing evil in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Writing at the Dawn of the Romantic Age

*Alexis, or on the Golden Age*, written mostly in the early 1780s but published in 1787 in F.H. Jacobi's German translation and half a year later in the original French, is one of François Hemsterhuis's most striking texts.<sup>5</sup> Formally, it is

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in a letter by Friedrich Schlegel; see *The Birth of Novalis: Friedrich von Hardenberg's Journal of 1797, with Selected Letters and Documents*, trans. and ed. Bruce Donehower (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>5</sup> On the citation of Hemsterhuis's published work using the Edinburgh Edition, see the editor's introduction to this special issue. I further cite the following editions of Hemsterhuis's work: the dual-language German-French edition of *Alexis* found in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke*, Bd. 5,1: *Kleine Schriften II, 1787-1817*, ed. Catia Goretzki and Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), 7-102—henceforth cited in-text as *JW* (I consider it important to reference Jacobi's German translation due to its influence on the Romantics); the 1782 *Vermischte philosophische Schriften*, which is to be found (alongside the

a classicist work: a Socratic dialogue set in classical Athens, and appearing to be almost atemporal—outside all turmoil of modernity and history—in its setting and subject-matter.

The dialogue's structure is simple. It has two interlocutors (Diocles, who may be taken to stand in for Hemsterhuis himself, and his younger friend Alexis) and may be divided into three parts, which are united by the overarching themes of the golden age and the *agon* between philosophy and poetry. The first part serves to lead up to the centerpiece of the dialogue: the cosmic myth of the golden age, which is then philosophically unpacked by Diocles in the third part. Alexis may be said to represent an aspiring enlightened philosopher who is skeptical of poetry, and of the tall tales that poets invent. Over the course of the dialogue, and most emphatically towards its end, Diocles tries to convince Alexis of the primacy of poetry and the truth of the idea of the golden age—and ultimately succeeds. Thematically, all of this at first glance seems traditional, including the insertion of a poetic myth which is then declared to be fictional yet to contain a true philosophical core.

The myth itself—a post-Copernican reconfiguration of the story of the Fall as expulsion from earthly paradise—is where one may first observe the threatening contingency and darkness beneath the dialogue's lucid setting. The astronomical presupposition for Hemsterhuis's myth is the fact that the Earth's rotational axis is tilted, and not perpendicular to its orbital plane; this axial tilt, or obliquity, is what causes the change of seasons. Based on the principles of Newtonian mechanics, the Earth's tilt, as Hemsterhuis argues in his scholarly notes to *Alexis* and in a separate text from 1784,<sup>6</sup> could not have appeared on its own, and must have been produced through the interference of a foreign force. This cosmic contingency, Hemsterhuis suggests, consisted in the appearance of the Moon. Our planet's satellite was not formed together with it but arrived as a comet from outer space. This comet was captured by the Earth's gravity, causing the planet's axis to tilt and putting a devastating end to what had previously been, across the entire globe, the golden age of paradisaal harmony and eternal spring.<sup>7</sup> This end was,

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French original) in François Hemsterhuis, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Jacob van Sluis (Leiden: Brill, 2011)—henceforth cited in-text as *OP*; and François Hemsterhuis, *Œuvres inédites*, ed. Jacob van Sluis (self-published, 2021)—henceforth cited in-text as *IN*. On the publication history of *Alexis*, see *JW* 468-473.

<sup>6</sup> See Hemsterhuis's *Letter on the Rotation of the Planets* in *IN* 129-36. On the pre-Hemsterhuisian tradition of interpreting the Fall as a cosmic catastrophe, see Michele Cometa, "Poetry and Catastrophe: The Romantic Tradition of Hemsterhuis's *Alexis ou de l'âge d'or*," in *Hemsterhuis: A European Philosopher Rediscovered*, ed. Claudia Melica (Napoli: Vivarium, 2005), 103-122.

<sup>7</sup> Hemsterhuis's position is a version of the so-called capture theory of the Moon's origin. The only alternative considered by him—the co-formation theory—is what he rejects based

however, the beginning of history as we know it. To this day, for Hemsterhuis, humanity and the planet have not recovered from this event, so that catastrophe is inscribed into the very constitution of human and planetary history.

More generally, as one reads Hemsterhuis's dialogue, one can observe an escalating tension at the heart of it—between, to put this schematically, its outward classicism and the more radical proto-Romantic impulse that seeks to break through to the surface, and in the end does break through, consuming the classical formalism in the pure light of Diocles's "enthusiastic" prophetic proclamation ("enthusiasm" is a key term in the dialogue) of the coming epoch of absolute bliss. This proclamation further strips the text of its atemporality even as this atemporality continues to be formally enacted, and places Hemsterhuis's thinking very much at the dawn of the Romantic explosion of the 1790s. Importantly, the idea of a new golden age that would unite humanity with itself, with the Earth, and with the Sun emerges in *Alexis* out of a reality that is grasped as negative and divided, starting with the first catastrophe, the Fall from paradisaical felicity due to the interference of an external cosmic force. The resulting turmoil of history, or the turmoil that *is* history, grows to be the dialogue's central problematic, reflecting in this the late-Enlightenment concern with the darkness, catastrophism, and overall negativity of history, and with the possibility of retaining hope amidst this negativity. Moreover, the golden age itself becomes, over the course of the dialogue, increasingly dynamic and processual; it loses its classical placement in the past and ends up being ever *in development* or in striving. As we will see, the concept "golden age" doubles and triples, perhaps even quadruples, towards the end of the text, and is identified dialectically with the striving for infinity that drives the entire history of humanity: a paradigmatically modern understanding of history and human nature.

Importantly, this striving does not fit the stereotype of an orderly progress. It is permeated, instead, by an insatiable thirst for possession, and by a cosmic anxiety and alienation generating the longing (*désir*, translated by Jacobi as *Sehnsucht*) for a return to an "absolute" state without division or striving. Hemsterhuis's myth of the golden age (and thus his cross-scalar construction of universal history) inhabits not an orderly cosmos, but what appears, from the earthly perspective, as an alien universe of contingency and disorder. It is as if the dialogue's classicist form were meant to contain the

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on Newtonian principles. The currently most widespread hypothesis, the impact theory, is not considered by him.

intensifying negativity and chaos of the critical late-eighteenth-century moment at which it is written—the negativity and chaos that would erupt, most forcefully, in Romanticism.

That is not to say that the dialogue’s form and setting should be discarded as merely an external shell in favor of the proto-Romantic sense of chaos, and the no less proto-Romantic impulse of bliss, that lurk underneath the text’s classicism and implode it from within. On the contrary: the form matters, because it serves the goal of distancing from and *keeping within bounds* the chaos, disorder, and catastrophe that constitute, as it were, the dark ground of the late-eighteenth-century thought, intensifying following the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the growing sense of the immensity and contingency of the universe. In this regard, the form itself serves the purpose of what Hans Blumenberg calls “the self-assertion of reason” vis-à-vis the chaotic contingency of modern reality, which reason seeks to subdue and order.<sup>8</sup> While the dialogue is rooted in its historical moment, the form serves to resist any reduction *to* this specific moment. Instead, the dialogue’s classicism displaces the present towards a meta-standpoint from which to construct a universal history and a system of times or “ages of the world” (*âges / Weltalter*).<sup>9</sup> This kind of meta-standpoint is important to Romanticism, too. From it, the philosopher can inquire into the origins and order of history across its different epochs and scales; justify the negativity of history by finding coherence in it, and by discovering usefulness even in catastrophe; and, finally, provide a horizon of salvation from history’s violence, divisions, and alienations. In other words, the meta-standpoint of universal history makes it possible to re-mediate rationally the contingency of reality, and to erect on top of the frightening abyss of contingency a philosophy of history that would serve, at the same time, as a theodicy. This theodicy recasts optimistically the ongoing catastrophe of history, pointing Romantically towards a new blessed age for all, a pantheism realized, and the prospect of a future that would be perfectly fulfilled and no longer threatening.

## 2. Demiurgic Contingency and the Specter of Gnosticism

The Moon arrives, in Hemsterhuis’s myth, as an alien demiurgic power—a bungling demiurge that, through mere chance, creates the world of human

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<sup>8</sup> See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> In this essay, I only reconstruct Hemsterhuis’s ages of the world in *Alexis*. For his system of times in *Letter on Man*, see Daniel Whistler, *Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

and planetary history as we know it by exacting on the Earth a force that “disorders” (*désordre / Unordnung*) all earthly materials and re-“mixes” them into a new state of conflict (*combat / Streit*), confusion (*confusion / Verwirrung*), and mixture (*mixture / Vermischung* [*JW* 54-5 / *EE* 2.136]). In the original catastrophe as imagined by Hemsterhuis, the contingency of the universe—contingency which, one could say following Blumenberg, reoccupies in modernity the infinity and infinite hidden will of God—reveals a quasi-divine power that brings with it disorder and upheaval. And although Newtonianism assumes a single uniform force of gravity acting throughout the universe, Hemsterhuis in his notes to *Alexis* speaks of the Moon as “a foreign force” or “alien force” (*une force étrangère / eine fremde Kraft* [*JW* 99 / *EE* 2.151]) that disrupts the harmonious unity of the Earth with the Sun, ending the solar golden age of pantheism on the Earth. The “alienness” indexes here the fact that, without the intervention of the Moon, the Earth-Sun system would have remained stable; the contingency that originates from the cosmic outside to this system, then, appears as a force that is foreign or other. From the de-centered standpoint of the infinite universe, there is but one universal force; from the earthly and human perspective, however, the sudden arrival of the Moon discloses a malignant and alien influence. This creates a quasi-Gnostic dualism between the Sun and the Moon, and accordingly between the solar power of pantheism and salvation, on the one hand, and the lunar power of alienation, division, and fallenness, on the other. Following this, the motifs of estrangement and doubling run, as we will see, throughout the dialogue.

The doubling intervenes into the original golden age, creating a reality of division or twoness; from the perspective of this doubling, the golden age appears as an epoch of absolute oneness. During this epoch, the Earth’s axis is not yet tilted and the Earth-Sun system is blissfully sufficient unto itself. The golden age is, most centrally, a state of “equality” or “equalness” (*égalité / Gleichheit* [*JW* 51 / *EE* 2.135]) in which the Earth and everything on it—from material substances and atmospheric processes to plants, animals, and humans—simply *are what they are*, without any striving or lack, existing in a state of utter harmony and self-identity, or what Schelling would call the perfect A=A (*all is what it is*). This state is one of “nature’s constant equality.” While there are different species and different climate zones, each is completely “uniform” (*uniforme / gleichförmig*). The sea and the wind are perfectly tranquil (*JW* 51 / *EE* 2.135). There is no change of seasons—instead, in the absence of an axial tilt, each latitudinal belt has a stable climate that produces everything that all species that inhabit it might ever need. Accordingly, there is no global movement of migration, as well as no “commerce,” no desire for competition (no “ambition”), and no “spirit of

property or of conquest,” or, as Jacobi translates it more emphatically, no pathological craving for them—no *Eigenthumssucht* or *Eroberungssucht*. This picture is antithetical to the age of global commerce, colonialism, and modern political economy that is the Enlightenment.

In the golden age, even the differences between species are not *real* differences, insofar as they lead to no contradiction, and the being of no species is premised on the negation of another species. In other words, one species’ *simply being what it is* does not negate the *being what it is* of any other species, and engenders no conflict and no dialectical process: a highly un-Hegelian image. Humanity’s paradisaical felicity (*bonheur* / *Glückseligkeit*) also consists in an immediate oneness with itself in its species-being: like all other being, human being simply is what it is, and every human senses herself to be one with other humans, immediately seeking to share her happiness with others, whose happiness in turn reinforces her own (*JW* 52 / *EE* 2.135). This is not a finite structure of happiness premised on satisfying a need or filling a lack—but a bliss of the immediate dissolution of the particular in the universal, or in the All. That humankind in this state does not yet know finitude is further emphasized by the fact that the human during the golden age is not aware of death: not because one does not die, but because one does not fear death—and death is indistinguishable from sleep or even, as Hemsterhuis seems to suggest with implicit reference to the idea of metempsychosis, from awakening within one continuous species-being (*JW* 54 / *EE* 2.136).<sup>10</sup>

The Earth is an endless *plenum* of natural riches (of nature’s *productions infimies* / *unendliche Zeugungskraft*) in which there is no scarcity. The Earth, and each form of being on it, is a self-sufficient All unto itself. Even trees are “always equally laden with fruit, flowers and greenery” at the same time (*JW* 51 / *EE* 2.135): an image of an absolute atemporal abundance without lack. The conjunction of human felicity across the globe and the planetary felicity (endless plenitude) of the Earth signifies, furthermore, the bliss of an immediate oneness between the global, the planetary, and the cosmic (i.e., the Sun as the condition for natural abundance on the Earth). This entire cross-scalar system is absolutely harmonious, and this state of harmony across scales *is* the golden age for the planet Earth and everything on it. The condition of possibility of the golden age is a cosmic condition.

During this golden age, everything is, and indefinitely remains, in its natural place—and each natural place is “divine,” ontologically because it is

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<sup>10</sup> On the significance of death in its connection with metempsychosis in Hemsterhuis, see Mähl, *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters*, 268.



an All unto itself, and cosmologically because it is determined by the unchanging benevolent solar influence on the surface of the Earth. Such is the cosmological sense in which this age is for Hemsterhuis an epoch of pantheism: since everything is divine in the above sense, God is perceived as omnipresent. During this period, humans are “much more distinctly affected by the omnipresence of the Divinity (*Divinité / Gottheit*)” (*JW* 53 / *EE* 2.136)—something, Jacobi appends in his translation, that is no longer possible “in our present state (*Zustande*)” (*JW* 53), i.e., the state of alienation and division, not immediacy.<sup>11</sup> The human soul in the golden age “swim[s] in a sea of sensual revelry” (*volupté / Wollust* [*JW* 53 / *EE* 2.136]). It should be noted that, from the perspective of Hemsterhuis’s broader organology,<sup>12</sup> human nature is not static but possesses a potentially infinite capacity for developing various “organs” of sensation, morality, and reason, but also for losing some of these organs in synchrony with humanity’s changing material conditions. Accordingly, in the golden age, the human possesses a (solar or pantheistic) sense-organ or “vehicle of sensation” (*JW* 74 / *EE* 2.142-3) which corresponds to the non-alienated planetary condition, and which becomes lost as the planetary condition changes—so that the human will regain this organ at the same time that the Earth as the human habitat regains its balance with the Sun.

This oneness is disrupted from the cosmic beyond—from the “faraway regions” relative to the Earth-Sun system, where the comet that would become the Moon originates (*JW* 54 / *EE* 2.136). In this way, the cosmic scale with its eccentricity and contingency intervenes into the planetary and global felicity. Flying close to the Sun, the comet which is to become the Moon is set ablaze, gaining a “flaming” visage due to which, as it subsequently approaches the Earth and gets captured by the planet’s gravity, it appears to the Earth’s inhabitants as a second, “increasingly immobile” ball of fire in the sky (*JW* 54 / *EE* 2.136). The gravitational effect of this near-collision is catastrophic: Hemsterhuis calls this a “terrible catastrophe” and “the great catastrophe of the terrestrial globe” (*JW* 56 / *EE* 2.136, *JW* 83 / *EE* 2.145). The disturbance of the Earth’s axis—the planet’s *falling-away* from its perfect state of balance—causes likewise a “strange alteration” in its surface and the “inner fluids” of its inhabitants (*JW* 54 / *EE* 2.136). In this

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<sup>11</sup> In the original French, “dans notre état présent” refers not to the feeling of pantheism but to the “tone of effort or victory which appears to us illustrious and brilliant in our present condition” (*JW* 53 / *EE* 2.136). Jacobi, however, moves this phrase so as to explicitly describe the modern human condition as no longer possessing the affect of divine omnipresence.

<sup>12</sup> On Hemsterhuis’s organology, see Whistler, *Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy*.

planetary, animal, and human Fall (*chute / Fall* [JW 81 / EE 2.145]), everything suddenly becomes malicious and disordered. Seas and winds rise, stars change their position in the sky, and first clouds form which “stain” the clarity of the heavens. Rains and floods begin. Lightnings and thunder arrive. What used to be one becomes divided on a planetary scale—as symbolized materially by the violent fragmentation of the Earth’s crust (“soon,” Hemsterhuis narrates, “the thick crust of the Earth broke in a hundred places to give rise to disorder which tormented [*tourmentoit / ängstigte*] every part of it from within” [JW 55 / EE 2.136]).<sup>13</sup> This material torment or *Angst* of the Earth, its own anxiety and fear, is inseparable from the first *Angst* of its inhabitants, who for the first time become alienated from the earth, the sea, and the skies. “They saw,” Hemsterhuis writes, “only a sea in turmoil, a strange and impure sky (*un ciel étranger & impur / einen fremden und unreinen Himmel*), and the doubtful and livid light of this hideous [celestial] body, the terrible principle of their sufferings” (JW 56 / EE 2.137).

Division and violence, confusion and conflict, are here as much a part of the “real” geophysical reality of the planet as the “ideal” mental reality across the animal and human realm. The Fall renders, furthermore, the “divine” dimension of reality divided or split for the first time—a pantheistic immanence transcendently torn apart—adding to the Gnostic overtones in Hemsterhuis’s depiction of an alien divinity under the alien sky, a divinity creating the shadow world of suffering:

Man who, shortly beforehand, adored in each star, in each flower, in each brother, at each dawn, a propitious God of which the Sun appeared as the most perfect symbol (*symbole / Bild*), believed to see in this new star the symbol of a victor God, more powerful than his own; an evil (*malfaisant / übelgesinnte*) God of destruction and of shadows (*ténèbres / Finsterniß*)—and this was the first cause of the foolish idea of a good and an evil principle. (JW 56 / EE 2.137)

We may observe in the above passage Hemsterhuis’s transcendental approach to history in which geophysical or natural developments are inseparable from the development of consciousness. In the Fall, human consciousness changes—becoming split and estranged—so that the world appears to, and begins to be articulated by, the human as a distribution of

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<sup>13</sup> The Earth’s materiality itself changes in this state of disorder: “The simple and uniform movement of the globe, which until then had prevented the different materials that it bore within from mixing together, from struggling with each other and fermenting with each other, was now destroyed and altered; nitre, sulphur, fire, all were confounded.... All the elements were in confusion, and their indigestible mixture gave birth to mixed, bastardised and, by nature, ambiguous materials” (JW 55 / EE 2.136).

binary categories: good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, mind and body, life and death. In particular, the Fall *enacts* death for the first time—as the first violent death on a mass scale (“millions of men and animals perished” [JW 56 / EE 2.136])—and this, too, tears consciousness apart. “For the first time, man saw death under a new aspect, as a forced state (*un état forcé / ein gewalthätiger Zustand*)”; in this way, the “horror” of death emerges, coming to define the new self-alienated condition of human finitude (JW 57 / EE 2.137). This horror is not exclusively human, either, emerging out of the disordered Earth not unlike the “black vapours” that appear with the Fall and externalize the inner planetary confusion (JW 55 / EE 2.136).

More generally, this entire “forced state” is planetary and cosmic too, just like the (no less forced) falling-away of the Earth’s axis under the influence of an alien force—echoing Hemsterhuis’s earlier description, in his 1770 *Letter on Desires*, of the “forced state” (*un état forcé*) of the entire universe. In this state, universal gravity or attraction (as tendency towards oneness) is contradicted by the isolated existence of bodies apart from each other (EE 1.85).<sup>14</sup> “The All is in a forced state,” Hemsterhuis proclaims, “since, tending eternally to union, while remaining always composed of isolated individuals, the nature of the All exists eternally in a manifest contradiction with itself.” In Hemsterhuis’s moral astronomy, which famously influenced the Romantics, and which implies the view of the All as the one real ethical substance, gravity morphs with *eros*—attraction, desire, or love—while, again, an alien “Agent” or “a foreign force” is what tears this *Ur*-oneness apart, creating a universe of particular relational bodies governed by laws. “It is,” writes Hemsterhuis strikingly, “a foreign force (*une force étrangère / eine fremde Kraft*) which has broken down the total unity into individuals: and this force is God.” (EE 1.85; OP 172-3)

This makes the creation of the universe into the deed of an alien demiurge, and into the even *more* original catastrophe on a cosmic scale: the *Ur*-breaking of oneness, the *Ur*-falling apart. As a “foreign” or “alien” force, the “God” of which Hemsterhuis speaks is not to be understood as the transcendent creator-subject in the vein of the Christian God. After all, the force that draws the Moon to the Earth is likewise called by Hemsterhuis a foreign or alien force; similarly, “God” in *Letter on Desires* may be taken to index demiurgic cosmic contingency, or a cosmic event that breaks up the pre-original unity. One may recall here, for instance, Buffon’s popular idea, later taken up by Schelling, that the solar system originally used to be one

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<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Trop describes this state of the Newtonian universe in Hemsterhuis as “a non-coincidence between attractive force and inertia.” See Trop, “Hemsterhuis as Provocation: The German Reception of His Early Writings,” in EE 1. 46.

solar body, and that this primordial unity was shattered by an external force or external celestial body, something like a huge comet which created an impact that divided the one *Ur*-solar substance into separate masses that eventually turned into planets. An event of this kind seems perfectly in line with what Hemsterhuis, in both *Letter on Desire* and *Alexis*, understands by an alien cosmic force.

Returning to *Alexis* and placing its myth of the Fall within Hemsterhuis's vision of a universe that seeks unity yet remains dispersed, one might ask: in such a universe, what is the principle of death but a self-reflective awareness of oneself *as* an individual, and thus as a separate mortal body and not as one with the universal processuality of love?<sup>15</sup> This awareness is precisely what the force of the lunar catastrophe introduces into human consciousness, ruining what appears, in view of the generally "forced state" of the universe depicted in *Letter on Desires*, as a rather unprecedented state of *unforced* bliss between the Sun and the Earth—itsself a contingent state, and thus prey to contingency.<sup>16</sup> If attraction is desire, then the Moon intervenes into this bliss, creating an unhappy love triangle. In fact, from the perspective of Hemsterhuis's recasting of gravity as desire or love, the entire emergence of the Moon may be read as a tragic (and gendered) story of desire.<sup>17</sup> All comets describe eccentric curves around the Sun, seeking to be one with this cosmic source of perfection<sup>18</sup>—yet the comet that would become the Moon could not, perhaps, temper its desire, and flew too close to the Sun. This only further set her desire ablaze ("the Sun" in French is masculine whereas "comet" and "the Moon" are feminine), and sent her onto a trajectory of near-collision with the Earth (also feminine). As a result, the Earth had to feel the entire, sudden and unwanted, impact of the Moon's desire, which was not desire *for* the Earth yet which disrupted the blissful Earth-Sun

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<sup>15</sup> Hence, in the original golden age, there was no death since an individual did not perceive itself, and was not perceived, as an individual body, but rather as immediately one with the universal "body" of its species. After the Fall, too, love or desire (as reproductive desire) is what connects an individual to the species, seeking to reconstitute the lost unity.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to emphasize this point: not only the emergence of the Moon is contingent, but the golden age as the state of perfect harmony between the Earth and the Sun is cosmically contingent. It so happened that the golden age was possible for a while without the interference of any alien force—but in a universe in which an alien force starts operating from the very beginning, such an undisturbed golden age was by no means a necessary occurrence.

<sup>17</sup> I follow here the suggestion of Claudia Melica, but interpret the story differently. See Melica, "Astronomy and Mythology: Hemsterhuis on the Moon," in *Hemsterhuis: A European Philosopher Rediscovered*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. in the 1772 *Letter on Man and His Relations*: "The science of man, or the human mind, appears to move around perfection, like comets around the Sun, by describing very eccentric curves" (*EE* 1.123; *OP* 292-3).

relationship. This event had, furthermore, catastrophic consequences not only for the planet, but for the Moon itself. Aflame with desire yet unsatisfied, the Moon burnt out and died. A failed lover and an unwitting demiurge “of destruction and of shadows,” she turned into a barren wasteland, “a dead head, an inert essence of a useless eternity (*essence inerte & d’une éternité inutile*)” (*JW* 57 / *EE* 2.137).

Her “useless eternity”—and her “inertness” that (to recall *Letter on Desires* again) may be taken to exemplify the inertia which stands, across the universe, in contradiction with the force of love—places the Moon, this symbol of the dark and alien cosmic expanse, outside the temporality of history. This eternity is “useless” since it is eternally exhausted and burnt out, of no use to history, and containing no possibility anymore: an empty indefinite duration. It cannot, as such, be inscribed into the logic of historical periodization and development that is engendered on the Earth by the Fall. For all eternity, the Moon is doomed to embody a useless repetition or sameness, a fate that is itself a shadow double of the (endlessly fecund) sameness of the golden age. Her fire of love extinguished, the Moon becomes infertile and non(re)productive, a heavenly body without history and without future. She thus becomes the ultimate “queer” figure in Lee Edelman’s terms, i.e., as he describes it, one “which does not conduce to the logic of periodization or identity,” and does not “submit to a temporal logic”—or, as he continues in his analysis of the queer refusal of the reproductive temporality of history, “better, the distortion of that logic by the interference, *like a gravitational pull, of some other, unrecognized force.*”<sup>19</sup> Hemsterhuis would call this gravitational force alien, and the useless eternity, and strange uselessness, of the Moon continues to embody the persistence of this alienness and queerness over and against the historical process (and the logic of historical periodization) that the encounter with the Moon triggers on the Earth.

To *correct* the lunar distortion, to chart a postlapsarian course towards infinite perfectibility and the restoration of a golden age, is the goal of the entire theodical narrative which follows the account of the Fall in *Alexis*, and to which I will turn below. Against the disturbance of the Fall, Hemsterhuis seeks to construct a narrative that would reconcile this disturbance via the logic of perfectibility and the proclaimed future perfection (the new golden age). Yet, the Moon in her useless eternity remains in *Alexis* an embodiment of a cosmic principle—the principle of cosmic contingency—that eternally

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<sup>19</sup> Lee Edelman et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13.2-3 (2007), 188; emphasis added.

refuses such theodical reconciliation, and remains non(re)productively and uselessly outside it. It is no wonder that Novalis would see in the postulation of the eternal nonproductivity of the Moon a defect in Hemsterhuis's narrative, and would assign humanity with the task of "educating" the Moon.<sup>20</sup> In that, Novalis exhibits an anxiety over what resists the meta-standpoint of universal history; he looks to inscribe the Moon back into the movement of possibility and usefulness. However, to do so is to fall into the logic of modern self-assertion as the desire or, in the Romantic language, striving (*Streben*) of the modern subject to expand onto and educate or shape the entirety of reality. It is also to miss the conceptual point of the *empty persistence* at the heart of post-Copernican cosmic contingency so evocatively grasped by Hemsterhuis in the figure of the Moon. In this contingency, no telos is guaranteed to be reached, and any cosmic desire, including the striving of the modern subject to educate everything and make everything useful, may ultimately fail. The Moon in *Alexis*, in her eternally failed desire, is a powerful symbol precisely because she persists in the possibility of such failure—over and against Hemsterhuis's theodical attempt to inscribe cosmic contingency into his narrative of perfectibility and his prophecy of the cosmic destiny of humanity and the golden age to come.

### 3. Philosophy, Poetry, and the Anxieties of History

In the original golden age, no history was possible or necessary. However, the Fall as the falling-away from the verticality of the golden age ruined this bliss, and since then humanity and the planet have been jointly striving to recover from that original catastrophe. As Hemsterhuis puts it in *Letter on the Rotation of the Planets*, the "irregularities" or "anomalies" that astronomers observe in the Moon's and the Earth's movement "are merely remnants of greater disorders, from which the Earth is trying to recover"—the cause of these disorders having been the arrival of the Moon and the resulting tilt of the Earth. "We see," Hemsterhuis continues, "that [the Earth] has been attempting to reorient its inclined axis" (*IN* 132).<sup>21</sup> The process of this recovery is as geo-cosmic as it is human, and it is this cross-scalar process that constitutes history as Hemsterhuis constructs it.

This view of history, with the ideal of the golden age as its constant reference point and telos, generates a further kind of anxiety—over the character of the historical process itself, including most centrally the

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<sup>20</sup> Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (München: Carl Hanser, 1978), 2:448.

<sup>21</sup> Translated Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler.

historical development of humanity. Is the state of humanity simply worse now compared to the perfection of the golden age? And is history a purely negative thing—is historical temporality but a “temporal misfortune”<sup>22</sup>? Generally, can this world out of joint, and the entirety of world history since the cessation of the golden age, be justified as *good* and *useful*, and not just a useless duration or degradation? This central theodical concern emerges already at the beginning of *Alexis*, where Diocles asserts categorically, in response to Alexis’s depiction of present human vices and the way they divide humans, that “human nature has *not* been bastardised (*abâtardie* / *ausgeartet*)” since the golden age (*JW* 19 / *EE* 2.125; emphasis added). The present state of human nature may lack the immediate fullness humanity enjoyed then; however, human nature remains essentially the same—and the Fall even appears, retrospectively, as a fortunate Fall insofar as it provided the impetus for the human to *rationaly develop* its capacities. Ultimately, even the present negative state of humanity is, in Hemsterhuis’s account, necessary and useful for the coming about of a better, even absolute future. From the standpoint of this future, coinciding with the standpoint of the universe as a totality, present imperfection appears as but a temporary state of “irregular” or “anomalous” oscillation or imbalance, and as part of the eccentric movement to higher perfection. Catastrophe and disorder generate a new order of human and planetary history, and this order in turn retroactively incorporates the original catastrophic contingency into its narrative of self-legitimation, so that contingency turns into necessity: the Fall, so this narrative goes, was necessary for the human nature to exit its immediate state, and to develop.

Hemsterhuis affirms the essential infinity and expansionism or openness of human nature, which is for him one with the openness of the post-Copernican expanse of reality. Considered from the standpoint of totality or the All in its overarching perfection (which persists even if the present state of things deviates from it), all nature is perfect—and if Hemsterhuis holds that human nature has not degenerated, then this is because already in the golden age the human possessed an infinite capacity for perfection, which continues to define it even in its current self-alienated state. In the original state of *plenum*, this infinite capacity simply did not need to develop since reality was likewise infinitely plentiful, and the infinity of the human and the infinity of the productions of the Earth were one. Put

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<sup>22</sup> An expression from Hemsterhuis’s *Letter on the Rotation of the Planets*, where he speaks of the Moon (or a possible bigger celestial body of which the Moon may have originally been a part) as “the principal cause of the alteration of this globe’s natural state and our temporal misfortunes (*malheurs temporels*)”—of our, as it were, misadventures in temporality. See *IN* 133; translated by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler.

differently, during the original golden age infinite human desire immediately found infinite fulfillment. This was not, moreover, desire for individual things—but, one could say, the desire for infinity itself.

The Fall, creating a new condition of danger and scarcity for all of the Earth's inhabitants, threw the human out of the paradisaical condition into a "finite and determinate world" (*le monde fini & déterminé / die endliche und bestimmte Welt* [*JW* 81 / *EE* 2.144]). In the opposition between paradisaical bliss and "the world," the beginning of world history consists precisely in the *non*-coincidence between desire and fulfillment. The world in its finitude is now perceived by animals and humans as a reality of "defect" or "lack" (*défaut / Mangel*), and as full of "obstacles" to their desires (*JW* 43-4 / *EE* 2.132). Additionally, since reality ceases to be plentiful and the human can no longer immediately satisfy its desire for infinity, the human cannot intuit the omnipresence of the divine in this new threatening reality, sensing the divine instead to be estranged (an estrangement symbolized by the Moon as a counter-solar deity). This phenomenological and material fact corresponds to the previously mentioned loss of the pantheistic sense-organ by the human due to the Fall.<sup>23</sup>

The new structure of negativity or lack is what activates, in the planet itself as well as its animal and human inhabitants, the "principle of perfectibility" (*principe de perfectibilité*), which Jacobi translates as "fundamental drive" (*Grundtrieb der Vervollkommenung* [*JW* 23 / *EE* 2.126]). This principle indexes the imbalance or gap between the potential capacity and desire for perfection, on the one hand (as the state in which desire finds total fulfillment), and its lack of actualization or satisfaction, on the other. As long as this imbalance persists, "perfectibility" implies that the being in question is capable of and "anticipates" (and strives for) a better state than its present one (*JW* 23 / *EE* 2.126). Temporally, this means that what used to be immediate, or here and now, becomes a future *telos*, which is constantly reproduced since, in this fallen state, the lack persists and no fulfillment is

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<sup>23</sup> Klaus Hammacher interprets Hemsterhuis's insistence on the importance of the material conditions for the development of human faculties as a problematic derivation of the spiritual from the material. See Hammacher, *Unmittelbarkeit und Kritik bei Hemsterhuis* (München: Fink, 1971), 171. At stake, however, is arguably the co-constitution of materiality and consciousness, the real and the ideal. This co-constitution may be understood in different ways: transcendently (in the vein of A.W. Schlegel's characterization of Hemsterhuis as "a prophet of transcendental idealism"), or as a kind of Spinozism, or as a speculative transformation of the empirical and experimental character of modern science (with Hemsterhuis speaking of the importance of the material or "matters" on which the human exercises its faculties for the development or, in the absence of appropriate "matters," stagnation of these faculties). Either way, Hemsterhuis's position is not a crude derivation of spirit from matter.



permanent (especially for the human being, whose desire is infinite). In other words, perfectibility is a drive towards regaining the perfect balance that characterized the original golden age—and, importantly, its temporality is not straightforwardly progressive, but (in Hemsterhuis’s Newtonian system) it orbits and approximates its telos in a kind of elliptical spiral-like loop.

In this looping movement, the concept of the golden age itself starts looping and multiplying as Hemsterhuis’s text, in its enthusiasm for the golden age, keeps circling around this concept and considering it from different angles. In the part of the dialogue that follows the myth, “golden age” is defined by Diocles philosophically as “the state of a being which enjoys all the happiness of which its nature *and current manner of being* are capable” (*JW* 77 / *EE* 2.143; emphasis added). While human nature, as the nature of any other being, is essentially unchangeable, the addition of “current manner of being” opens the possibility of multiple “golden ages”—and indeed, this may explain why towards the end of the dialogue Diocles suddenly starts speaking of the second “golden (or rather, silver) age” right after the Fall (*JW* 84 / *EE* 2.145).

“The silver age” is a reference to Hesiod, whose *Works and Days* is a point of reference throughout the dialogue. However—the reader may ask<sup>24</sup>—why speak here of the second golden age, and not simply of the silver age? This age, after all, does not seem absolutely perfect; during it, the human exists merely in an animal state and attains only to “an animal perfection” (*JW* 84 / *EE* 2.145). Here instinct reigns, as the immediate coincidence of (finite) wants and their (finite) satisfaction by individual objects. As such, this age cannot satisfy humanity’s desire for infinity. Yet, the point of Hemsterhuis’s conceptual definition of the golden age is precisely to make possible different golden ages for different beings, and for different modes or stages of existence of a particular being, within one historical process. The second golden age, as the golden age of instinct, *is* the golden age for animal beings, whose “principle of perfectibility has a determinate limit” (*JW* 77 / *EE* 2.143). At the same time, it is a *relative* golden age for the human being too, *insofar as* the human exists here at the level of instinct, and so regains—at the lowest level—some of the balance it used to enjoy during the original golden age.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Heinz Moenkemeyer, *François Hemsterhuis* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), 160.

<sup>25</sup> A further equivocation should be noted in the concept of the golden age. When speaking of the original golden age, Hemsterhuis relies on poetic myth and astronomy—on traces of a cosmic “revolution” in mythical traditions. In the later part of the dialogue, however (see *JW* 76 / *EE* 2.143ff.), Alexis asks, in an Enlightenment manner, for a purely philosophical definition of the golden age, which Diocles provides (quoted above). Following this line of questioning, Diocles temporarily chooses to forego any reference to myth and asks whether,

The silver age is thus “the moment when man and animal were at the same point, when man was happy as an inhabitant of the Earth” or, in Jacobi’s translation, “when man was content solely with his earthly happiness (*Erdenglücke*)” (*JW* 80 / *EE* 2.144). Unlike the animal, the human, however, cannot be truly satisfied with this (instinctual and finite) animal perfection, and is therefore driven to exit this state—which signals, in an Enlightenment manner, the development of human freedom and reason. The human, therefore, “passed beyond” or, Jacobi writes in a proleptically Romantic formulation, “strove on” (*strebte weiter* [*JW* 80 / *EE* 2.144]) beyond this condition. One could put it this way: human nature is infinite—and accordingly, *out of* the postlapsarian condition of finitude in which it finds itself, the human strives to regain, and is capable of regaining, its original infinity.

With its transcending of the purely instinctual state, however, the human becomes aware of the gap between its desire and the finitude of objects, none of which can truly satisfy the human desire for infinity, which is “vague and indeterminate” (or, as Jacobi translates it, goes *ins Weite* or expands [*JW* 78 / *EE* 2.144]). The human starts to be driven *by* this gap in a desperate attempt to close it—by a dissatisfaction with the “present state” combined with an “innate” hope (*espérance* / *Hoffnung*) and a desire or longing for “a different state” (*JW* 79 / *EE* 2.144) in response to the immanent inner call of the golden age. As a result, the human becomes “an unhappy being on the Earth” (*JW* 84 / *EE* 2.145), estranged from nature (including its own) but still sensing infinity and perfection within itself, entering what may be called an age of unhappiness. Ultimately, even the golden times themselves start to appear to the human as “equally alien” (*gleich fremde* / *également étrangères*), so that the human ceases to know any condition other than the present, unsatisfactory one. A threefold structure of alienation or contradiction emerges here as defining the fallen human condition: alienation from

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“without regard to traditions or to divine inspiration,” one can discern the possibility of a golden age based “solely [on] the nature of man we know it” (*EE* 2.143). It is then from the present, postlapsarian human nature that Diocles deduces the “golden (or rather, silver) age” as a golden age of instinct and animal perfection, followed by the development of reason and freedom. The original, prelapsarian golden age cannot be deduced philosophically based on “the nature of man as we know it”; it can only be intuited via poetry. There is thus a bifurcation at this point in *Alexis* with regard to what constitutes the first golden age. From a philosophical standpoint, the original absolute golden age is a poetic fiction (it is merely “figurative” from a philosophical point of view [*JW* 77 / *EE* 2.143]), and the first rationally deducible golden age corresponds to Hesiod’s silver age. From the standpoint of poetry, however, which is ultimately affirmed in *Alexis* as the higher standpoint, the original golden age is a fundamental truth, which philosophical reason only seeks to approximate, so that what for philosophy is the first (golden) age emerges from the standpoint of poetry as, in truth, the second (silver) age.

itself, from nature, and from God. This structure splits the divine itself in two: into the false idea of the good and the evil principle, whose struggle Hemsterhuis sees as permeating human consciousness after the Fall, and as leading the human to believe dualistically in “the marvelous” over and against the natural world (*JW* 58 / *EE* 2.137).

During the dark age of unhappiness, the human may dimly sense but does not know its true nature and destiny. This knowledge is gained gradually, and the figure of the enlightened wise or sage (*le sage / der Weise*) is central here for Hemsterhuis. This figure’s role is ultimately theodical: it is rational reconciliation with the fallen condition, and with the course of the world. On the one hand, the wise learns to find the beautiful (*le beau / das Schöne*) and the sublime (*le sublime / das Erhabene*) in the threatening and contingent external world, while regarding the golden age as a tale that is far removed from the realities of human nature.<sup>26</sup> The wise teaches humanity to find beauty and meaning in finitude and contingency, and this is the beginning of what may be called the age of enlightenment, in which humanity starts to know itself and to find its way (*se reconnoître / sich zurecht finden* [*JW* 58 / *EE* 2.137]).

Moreover, instead of nostalgia for a past bliss, and instead of belief in the marvelous, the wise seeks to discern *in the present*, and in the course of history, that which would connect the present to the better future. The wise discerns in the infinity of human desire the future destiny of humanity, and thus the ground for rational *hope* (this essential principle of eighteenth-century theodicy) in the face of the presently negative state of humanity and the world. In enlightening humanity about its true infinite nature, the wise gradually reconciles not only alienation from the world, but human self-alienation. The human, writes Hemsterhuis, was “an unhappy being on the Earth, until the wise taught him by an enlightened philosophy to link again the present to the future and to recognize the homogeneity of his eternal existence”—i.e., the infinite oneness of human nature (*JW* 84 / *EE* 2.146). The implied *continuity* of human development which the wise restores is important, since it allows to rationally re-mediate the vague longing for the golden age into a historical path towards it as transposed into the absolute future. In this way, theodical reconciliation occurs with the negative or fallen state of the world, and the perceived present evils that plague humanity. Through the development of reason and the sciences, a golden age can be reached that would incorporate all the powers that humanity develops over

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<sup>26</sup> This may be regarded as the beginning of the “enlightened” philosophical standpoint from which the original golden age appears as a mythical or “figural” tale (a standpoint described in the previous footnote).

the course of world history. It is precisely from the perspective of this development and this higher state that the Fall emerges, retrospectively, as a fortunate Fall.

This perspective coincides, furthermore, with the standpoint of the cosmic whole in its perfection, from which the presently self-divided state of humanity appears as but a temporary deviation (“merely an accidental appearance” [JW 82 / EE 2.145]) or an eccentric path towards perfection. This, too, is a traditional theodical motif: evil and negativity may appear to be ubiquitous and insurmountable if we focus myopically on the present, but if we elevate ourselves to the cosmic standpoint, we can see that they are insignificant or even useful and have their place, and are therefore justified, within the coherence of the whole. For Hemsterhuis, the development of reason and the sciences towards their future perfection proceeds precisely under the guidance of an immediate sense of the universe in its divine wholeness. In a proto-Romantic move, this sense is for him provided, however, not by enlightened philosophy but by poetry and enthusiasm; in fact, innate human longing for the better state and the wise person’s rational hope in it are both ultimately grounded in the intuition of the universe to which “enthusiasm,” as Hemsterhuis understands it, transports us.

The concept of enthusiasm in Hemsterhuis anticipates proleptically the Romantic ideas of prophecy and intellectual intuition. For Hemsterhuis, it is only possible to grasp the whole and the true immediately, and not based on selfhood or intellect (*l’intellect / Verstand*). Enthusiasm dispossesses the finite self and, as if carried by an unknown force (the divine or solar power), we become in it immediately one with “the bosom (*sein / Schooße*) of nature”<sup>27</sup> or catch its “spark,” which shoots through us like lightning (*foudre / Blitz* [JW 70 / EE 2.141]). Enthusiasm acts like divine inspiration, and cannot be reduced to the work of one’s imagination or one’s conscious effort. It functions absolutely “without any effort (*effort / Anstrengung*)” or “without work (*travail / Arbeit*)” (JW 73 / EE 2.142), transporting us immediately to the standpoint of the golden age in which all being—the All itself—simply is, without striving or lack, and in which we sense the omnipresence of “a Divinity” (JW 74 / EE 2.142).<sup>28</sup> This is precisely the standpoint of poetry: the “fecund source of true poetry” (JW 75 / EE 2.143), coinciding with what

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<sup>27</sup> The same cosmic *sein de la nature* from which the Earth itself originates (JW 20 / EE 2.125). The human, the planet, and the universe are immediately joined in this cross-scalar intellectual intuition.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the earlier description of the golden age as “a perfect rest without work and without trouble” (JW 18 / EE 2.124). As Hemsterhuis writes elsewhere, the universe considered as a whole is likewise characterized by “the most perfect rest” (EE 2.75 / OP 426).

is absolutely true and absolutely real. This poetic seeing sees even into the future (*JW* 74 / *EE* 2.142), and this underlies the operation of divination or prophecy. What it divines is the absolute state, the new golden age, from the perspective of which all present negativity disappears: a poetic or aesthetic cosmic theodicy that would resonate throughout Romanticism, too.

“I sense,” proclaims Alexis in response to Diocles’s explanation of enthusiasm, “that the most profound reasoning (*raisonnement* / *Schlüsse*), the wisest and most reflective march of the intellect, would supply us with very few new truths, if it were not sustained, directed or pushed by this enthusiasm” (*JW* 74 / *EE* 2.142). This is the sense in which even the rational hope and enlightenment offered by the wise, as well as the development of the sciences, are upheld or sustained (*soutenu* / *unterstützt*) by the immediate intuition of the All. The capacity for such enthusiasm, in its oneness with the absolute, may itself be regarded as a trace of the golden age within us. This trace of bliss may be repressed by the postlapsarian world of division and alienation, and yet it is on what is immediately accessed in enthusiasm—on the bliss of the golden age—that this world lives and feeds. What is accessed in enthusiasm is at once divine and sublime (and thus higher than the world), and remains *below* as that on which the world is imposed and which upholds from below (*unter-stützt*) the rational course of the world and the soul’s longing. This coincidence of the above and the below is cosmic, too: the light of the Sun and the darkness of the universal expanse as the two poles of the universe.

#### 4. Terrestrial and Cosmic Reconciliation—and Its Theodical Pitfalls

The philosopher and the poet conjointly help to reconcile the divided world: the former through learning (and teaching) rationally to discern the true character of human existence and to approximate the better future; the second through intuiting immediately the divine and the golden age, and thus uniting with and upholding the absolute source and direction of desire. In the end, in the final golden age, all the sciences, proclaims Diocles, will develop to such an extent that they will flow into one perfectly immediate knowledge. Behind this idea stands an important intuition: the purpose of knowledge *qua* mediation is to bring together what is divided and not already one. The sciences, as based on mediation and reflection, are already part of the postlapsarian structure of reality and knowledge; in the original golden age, knowledge is immediate and perfect, and no mediation is necessary. This kind of immediacy is what mediation seeks to approximate—so that, when it reaches perfection and becomes instantaneous (or finds no obstacle in reality

anymore), mediation itself turns into immediacy. This idea, which would later be central for the Romantics and Hegel (in particular, in his idea of *der freie Geist* as finding no opposition from reality), may be said to mark the ultimate desire of the post-Copernican cosmically alienated subject: to finally feel at home in a universe that would no longer be perceived as threatening and alien.

In this final reconciled state, division and alienation are overcome from within, the human becomes one with the infinite reality, and science coincides with poetry. “When it comes to the [final] golden age of man after this life,” speaks Hemsterhuis of humanity’s cosmic destiny, “his joys there will be more intimate, more coherent”—one with the harmony of the All—“and all his knowledges (*connoissances / Kenntnisse*) will be joined together, like the colours of the rainbow are mixed in the heart of a crystal and form together just one pure light.” In this, human spirit will finally reach the kind of solar perfection around which all human history and all planetary desire elliptically orbit, with the “pure light” of absolute knowledge constituting “the perfect image of that shining star which bore them”—i.e., the colors but also the human knowledges—“in its bosom” (*JW* 85 / *EE* 2.146).

The becoming-one of human spirit with the Sun is premised, however, on its becoming-one or harmonious with the Earth. At this point, as Hans-Joachim Mähl observes, the future golden age bifurcates in Hemsterhuis, too: the final golden age *beyond* this Earth (hence “after this life” in the above quotation) is premised on the smaller-scale planetary golden age in harmony *with* the Earth.<sup>29</sup> In *Alexis* and other writings, Hemsterhuis suggests that human desire and potential are too infinite to be confined solely to this planet, and that the human is a being whose evolution is not only terrestrial but cosmic—an idea that was also important for Herder, and that would become an integral part of Romantic cosmism. For Hemsterhuis, the Earth serves as the first training ground for the development of human powers, but while this ground is limited, human powers are potentially unlimited and their expansive actualization cannot be contained. Here on the Earth, he asserts in a text from the early 1780s, the human is “a bird of passage, or rather a being who, by some unknown law, has clung to [earthly] matter for a bit of time to exercise his faculties, as he will probably exercise them in other categories on totally different matters” (*IN* 61).<sup>30</sup> As an inhabitant of the Earth, the human only has “a small number of organs,” writes Hemsterhuis in a letter from 1780, and cannot develop the infinity of faculties

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mähl, *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters*, 277-8, who counts four golden ages in *Alexis*.

<sup>30</sup> Translated by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler.

of which its nature is capable.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in Diocles's prophetic speech at the end of *Alexis* (see *JW* 84-5 / *EE* 2.146), the invocation of the final cosmic golden age "after this life" is preceded by the depiction of the terrestrial golden age—called the "third [golden] age"—in which the human reaches the highest knowledge and highest happiness allowed by "his current organs," and by "what he can enjoy on the Earth."

In an Enlightenment and proto-environmentalist manner, for the terrestrial golden age to be attained, the human must *temper* its infinite desire, elliptically retrace its steps, and recognize the limitations of the Earth's resources and of humanity's earthly existence. This golden age "will take place," Diocles points out, "when [the human] distinctly sees the limits of his intelligence with regard to the aspects of the universe that he can know" from the Earth, and "when he perceives the absurd disproportion between his desires and what he can enjoy on the Earth" and so "finds a salutary and just equilibrium (*équilibre / Gleichgewicht*) between his desires and the objects placed in the sphere of his current activity"—an equilibrium "enriched by all the insight of which his nature here below is capable" (*JW* 84-5 / *EE* 2.146).<sup>32</sup> The history of global humanity and planetary history culminate jointly in a new equilibrium, a regained state of verticality in which the Earth itself would find a new balance and restore its tilted axis.

This equilibrium is not easy for the human to attain, and in fact its entire history seems to contradict the possibility of reaching this state. As Hemsterhuis describes powerfully earlier in the dialogue, during the age of unhappiness, the human is filled with an insatiable thirst for possession and expansion—"in the vain and mad hope of finding in the quantity of these finite and determinate objects" the "analogue" to the infinite perfection for which its nature longs (*JW* 81 / *EE* 2.145). The highly modern understanding of the human nature as driven to expand into infinity, and to master all dimensions or scales of possibility—the depths of the Earth (the planetary) and the entire surface of the globe (the global) no less than the expanse of the skies (the cosmic)—determines for Hemsterhuis the course of human development starting from this age:

...as soon as he [i.e., man] measured the heavens, crossed the seas, drew metals from the depths of the Earth to decorate his figure, to destroy his brothers or to forge signs for the property he had claimed; as soon as he formed states, prescribed laws and, at the height of absurdity, wanted

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Mähl, *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters*, 274.

<sup>32</sup> Note the relative character of this terrestrial golden age again through the qualifications such as "current activity" and "here below."

only one man to be the proprietor of millions of his fellow men... immediately all the madness, the horrors and the disorders, the absurdities and the inconsistencies... had to naturally manifest themselves, while at the same time demonstrating to man, in the most perfect way, the nobility and stability of his nature and that his bastardisation was merely an accidental appearance. (*JW* 81-2 / *EE* 2.145)

This passage may seem paradoxical, but its theodical twist—according to which in the evils themselves one discerns the noble and the good—reiterates the familiar logic: the infinity of human desires discloses the desire for infinity inherent in human nature. This is precisely what the enlightened sage can discern “in the most perfect way,” so that enlightenment may be said to consist for Hemsterhuis in recognizing at once the infinite nature *and* the present incompleteness of the human in its earthly state, and in teaching humanity to temper its desires accordingly so as to regain balance. Implied in this entire logic, furthermore, is the assumption on which modern science from Francis Bacon onwards is premised: that as human knowledge of reality and mastery over reality grow, material reality changes too, becoming less threatening and serving for the exercise of human faculties that is so important to Hemsterhuis. In this process, the emerging consciousness of oneness—of the one human nature, and of a necessary oneness with the Earth—is provided with material and phenomenological conditions of possibility. The excesses of the thirst for power, possession, and expansion are thus justified by Hemsterhuis as subservient to the noble end goal of reconciliation and oneness, and as that *through* which the human’s true nature is “demonstrated.”

Although the dialogue is set in antiquity, it speaks also, by way of the classical age of Greek philosophy, of and to the modern age of Enlightenment—setting up a post-Newtonian vision of universal history, and a poetic and philosophical program for enlightenment as the human and cosmic imperative. Taken together, the motifs of endless striving and limitless possession, of the infinite expansionism of mastery and desire, of theodical hope in the future and finding sublimity even in contingency and finitude, and finally of enlightenment itself, and of overcoming the belief in dualism, miracles, and the supernatural, form a nexus that resonates throughout eighteenth-century thought. And although Hemsterhuis speaks simply of human global history, and of global humanity, the implied subject of this process is the modern Western subject of ceaseless striving, expansion, and mastery, of infinite development and forward movement. What Blumenberg calls the “existential program” of Western modernity—the “self-



assertion of reason through the mastery and alteration of reality”<sup>33</sup>—is configured by Hemsterhuis as the assertion by the human of its higher, infinite essence. The age of enlightenment is when this self-assertion becomes (self-)conscious. This creates a dialectical structure of self-reflection, in which humanity reflects its endless outward desire inward and returns to itself, learning its own true nature and limits.

Yet, it is only as this infinitely expansionist subject that the human, or humanity as a whole, can discover its true nature and destiny, and the Earth can restore its tilted axis. The striving of the planet, Hemsterhuis implies, is one with the striving of *this* normative subject, who thereby acquires a truly planetary and cosmic significance. The Earth is proclaimed, in the same move, to be but the training ground for this subject’s exercise of its powers. And even if one reads it most radically as implying that intelligence is a planetary-scale phenomenon and consciousness itself is planetary, or that, as Novalis would say, “humanity is the higher sense-organ of our planet, the eye which our planet raises to the sky, the nerve which connects this part [of the universal organism] to the world above”<sup>34</sup>—still, it is the modern subject, its retroactive construction of its own history as universal history, and its global project of enlightenment that are implied, in both Hemsterhuis and Novalis,<sup>35</sup> to carry planetary intelligence and to constitute the “higher” organ of the planet.

In a way that reflects the broader logics of the modern colonial construction of “humanity” as a global category from the Western center, the affirmation of the normative subject of world history (“the human” or “man”) is also imbricated in Hemsterhuis with the denigration or exclusion of those who remain at the less-than-human or nonhuman level.<sup>36</sup> One may recall here Hemsterhuis’s idea of the silver age as that of lower, merely “animal perfection.” Seeing as the principle of perfectibility is inherent in both animal and human nature, the human is distinguished not so much by perfectibility but by the *infinity* thereof. The human, as Hemsterhuis defines it, can never be satisfied with a given sphere of existence, but seeks constantly to transcend its present boundaries, and to expand possessively onto all reality. Whoever is *not* like that, then, whoever rests content or does nothing instead of constantly striving forward, is lower or less than human. In his

<sup>33</sup> Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> Novalis, *Werke*, 2:354.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Novalis’s 1799 “Christianity, or Europe,” which proclaims the task of universal enlightenment as the (Christian-modern) European task.

<sup>36</sup> On this logic in modernity see Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being / Power / Truth / Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003), 257-337.

*Reflections on the Republic of the United Provinces*, this normative construction of global humanity becomes explicit, with Hemsterhuis speaking about “those peoples who inhabit islands, or who are scarcely exposed to passages or to expeditions from abroad” as ones who persist in “barbaric simplicity” (*IN* 68)<sup>37</sup>—i.e., in a quasi-silver age outside the movement of world history (a movement that has already progressed past the “animal” stage in which these peoples remain stuck). As a result, a whole nexus of colonial dimensions of barbarism, childhood, and indolence, typical for Enlightenment thought, haunts Hemsterhuis’s vision of the ages of the world.

In a conceptual sleight of hand, in Hemsterhuis’s construction of human nature the expansionist “vague and indeterminate” desire is theodically reconfigured and extolled as desire *for* infinity, for a higher state or something universally better, instead of being seen for what it arguably is: expansionism for the sake of expansionism and possession for the sake of possession, a futile attempt to fill the void of post-Copernican cosmic alienation at the heart of modern subjectivity, and to impossibly re-assert “man” at the center of infinite post-Copernican reality. Within this structure of striving which constitutively has no end, it is no wonder that all fulfillment, happiness, and desire are transitory and fleeting, except the desire *to* desire endlessly—and that Hemsterhuis transposes conclusive fulfillment into the faraway cosmic stage of human evolution or even into the next life.

More generally, the entire narrative that Hemsterhuis constructs could serve as a fitting allegory for post-Copernican modernity itself. With the Copernican Revolution the subject is suddenly and catastrophically severed from the pre-given cosmic order and thrust into an infinitely contingent universe—onto a newly de-centered planet, and into a de-centered abyss of contingency whose horror (and the resulting structure of loss) Johannes Kepler and John Donne invoke already at the start of the seventeenth century. The modern process of the self-assertion of reason may be said to constitute the striving to rationally re-mediate the “fallen” reality in which the subject finds itself, to find meaning in it, and to gain firm footing vis-à-vis the threatening universe. Not unlike in Hemsterhuis’s description of the Fall, death, too, seems stripped of meaning in a universe that has no higher spheres in which the dead could dwell. The Copernican event is a cosmic catastrophe, after which there is no return to the perceived harmony of the pre-modern cosmos, only endless alienation and ceaseless self-assertion over and against the newly opened abyss.<sup>38</sup> In this process, the subject seeks to

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<sup>37</sup> Translated by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler.

<sup>38</sup> By setting *Alexis* in the supposedly harmonic age of classical antiquity, too, Hemsterhuis may be taken to perform the modern nostalgia for a golden age of nonalienation, or for a

measure, appropriate, and master the infinite expanse of reality, and thereby to regain, step by step, stability and hope—so as to find harmony with the de-centered Earth and ultimately to be at home in the post-Copernican universe. Such is, precisely, the future envisioned by *Alexis*.

Hegel's later dictum that world history is a theodicy, i.e., an unfolding of what is divine or higher through negativity and suffering, applies likewise to Hemsterhuis's construction of the ages of the world. One may disagree over the question of how many ages of history in total are to be discerned in this construction. Most broadly, the answer may be three ages (paradise—fall—reconciliation and restoration). In keeping with Hesiod's *Works and Days* as the explicit point of reference for *Alexis*, one may count five ages total, but even so one may count them differently.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, since the Fall itself has duration and is depicted by Hemsterhuis as a period of change, one could end up with as many as seven epochs: the original golden age; the Fall; the silver age; the age of unhappiness; the age of enlightenment; the new terrestrial golden age; the final cosmic golden age. This would make the culmination of human history coincide with a kind of cosmic Sabbath, the epoch of cosmic bliss and tranquility, one with the true state of the universal All in its "most perfect rest (*repos / Ruhe*)" (*EE* 2.75 / *OP* 426-7). In this final age, the omnipresence of divinity, lost with the original golden age, would be restored, too, in a cosmic pantheism of divine repose.

## 5. The Golden Age vs. the World: A Coda

No matter how many ages of the world one counts in *Alexis*, the final theodical ruse in Hemsterhuis's construction remains the same: it is the very inscription of the golden age as ideal into the movement of the world so as to justify this movement. Within world history, Hemsterhuis claims, one can discern the ideal of the golden age as that towards which this history, despite its evils, has always already been directed. At each stage, history (as the history of human striving too) is driven by the golden age reconfigured as the telos which can only be reached *through* the movement of history. As a result, the logic of periodization itself is revealed to be theodical, all evil and suffering

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cosmic order that, as a result of the catastrophic shock of the Copernican event, modernity lost.

<sup>39</sup> The sequence could be, for instance, the original golden age; the second golden (silver) age; the age of unhappiness; the age of enlightenment; the new golden age. Or, alternatively, the original golden age; the silver age; the age of fallenness (encompassing the entirety of history since the Fall); the new terrestrial golden age; the final cosmic golden age.

turn out to be a temporary deviation, and the universe turns out to be perfect and to require no redemption.

This kind of inscription of the a-worldly bliss of the golden age into the movement of the world, which is also foundational for much of Romantic and Idealist philosophy of history, is not as natural as it might appear; the idea of the golden age could instead just as easily be directed *against* human history and the world. Considered immanently, the golden age is ahistorical and utopic, without any processuality or striving. As such, it names an ante-original site discontinuous with the logic of world history (a discontinuity signaled by the event of the Fall), and something that has never fully existed in history. It is a nonplace from the perspective of history—a nonplace that, in poetic intuition, is revealed to be cosmically-real. It indexes thus a utopic cosmic site opposed to the evils of history. Even if one says with Hemsterhuis that history has always orbited elliptically around this utopic nonplace as the site of perfection, this site could still serve to index that which the world is *not*, and thus a “no” to the world as it is. The figure of the golden age cannot but arise, after all, out of a deep dissatisfaction with the way things are. The golden age is immanently antagonistic to the world, and in particular to the modern alienated world of endless striving and work. What is imagined in the figure of the golden age is *fulfillment in the now*. Yet, in this world, the demand of fulfillment right now is impossible. As a result, from the perspective of the subject’s striving in the world, the golden age can only appear as a lost past bliss or a future bliss to be regained, creating the (highly Romantic) affective mixture of ceaseless longing, nostalgia, and anticipation. To justify the world as this endless in-between, in which bliss is irretrievably lost, and in which fulfillment is promised but never comes (except perhaps in the next life), is the central task of theodicy.

In other words, the idea of the golden age threatens to delegitimize the world—and it is to prevent the golden age from being a figure of world-delegitimation that Hemsterhuis turns it into a figure of world-legitimation, inscribing it into the logic of history and futurity. The resulting theodicy functions across scales: the cosmic and the planetary are in it mobilized jointly to legitimate the history of global humanity, and to position the modern global subject as a truly cosmic being. The horror of cosmic contingency is defused by making the Fall, and the history that follows, useful for humanity’s development, and for reaching the higher state. Even death is stripped of its threatening contingency and finality by the doctrine of metempsychosis, which Hemsterhuis merges with the idea of progressive evolution of humanity. This doctrine serves perhaps another implicit goal: to affirm that, even if another cosmic contingency were to befall the Earth or if

the Earth were to collide with a comet (a possibility that was very much on the minds of Hemsterhuis's contemporaries), this would not have to result in human extinction or an irreparable setback in humanity's development—since humanity in its evolution transcends this planet, and transcends death itself.

In his theodicy, Hemsterhuis seeks to exorcize the specter of Gnosticism by affirming the goodness of the universe over and against the cosmic contingency embodied by the Moon, this “evil” demiurge and principle of darkness, in her eternally useless exclusion and cosmic failure. Perhaps, however, there is a way to imagine a different conception of the golden age from the standpoint of the Moon—a queer lunar bliss that would be premised not on “educating” the Moon, thereby reiterating the logic of human self-assertion, but on the kind of inhabitation of the post-Copernican universe that would embrace immanently its infinite contingency as carrying with itself the possibility of nonproductivity, uselessness, and failure. In a universe in which even the Sun is destined to be extinguished, it is perhaps what is eternally useless, and what embodies at once the striving *and* the reality of its failure, that should be identified with what is cosmically-real. To affirm the human, and the modern subject of self-assertion (“man”), as a cosmic being or planetary intelligence would be, from this perspective, not to reinstate the modern global subject at the center of the universe or to proclaim this subject's inevitable noble destiny in inhabiting the stars, transcending death, and seeing the universe “in the manner of the Gods” (*EE* 2.121; *OP* 572-3). It would mean rather to inhabit immanently the de-centeredness of humanity and the Earth in their frangible interconnection, and to see in present humanity, as Friedrich Schlegel suggests in his notebooks, a cosmic experiment (*Versuch*) that might ultimately fail.<sup>40</sup> To proceed immanently from the perspective of cosmic failure without the anxiety of self-assertion would not mean to stop humanity's cross-scalar experiments, or to stop seeing modern humanity itself as an important cross-scalar experiment—but, on the contrary, to open up a conceptual and poetic *Spielraum* for what is antagonistic to or comes after the world of modernity, and for what re-visions the global from a cosmic standpoint without justifying this world as the best possible. This too would imply that the world requires no redemption, but in a different, anti-theodical sense: as the refusal of spiritual and cosmic investment in this world, since it does *not* have to be the way it is.

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<sup>40</sup> See Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 18, ed. Ernst Behler (München-Paderborn-Wien: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1963), 192: “Could it not be, perhaps, that human history will find a truly miserable end, half-tragic, half-comedic, so that nothing will emerge from it.”

Elsewhere, Schlegel envisions evocatively that, once this attempt comes to an end, the spirit of humanity will become one with the Sun whereas its material “cinders” will form a new Moon-like body and be expelled into the extra-terrestrial expanse.<sup>41</sup> Speculatively, this reads almost like a reconfiguration of the story of the Moon from *Alexis*, so that one may ask: what if that was how our Moon originated too, as a material fragment of an even earlier failure? And what if to become one with the Sun is not to master the universe in the manner of the Gods, but to re-vision it from a standpoint that equates experimentation, irony, and contingency with what is cosmically-real, and from the perspective of the phoenix-like processuality of the universe in which the end of one cosmic world is but the beginning of another? It may be that what must be accessed in poetic enthusiasm—and this is where the Romantics go beyond Hemsterhuis—is not just the golden age but the deeper cosmic contingency and disorder which underlie it and out of which it emerges, and which break through in the Fall and the sudden emergence of the Moon. If, as Schlegel says echoing Hemsterhuis, “the sole principle of poetry is enthusiasm,” then (Schlegel continues) poetry can only embody it by being one with the “fury of physics (*Wuth der Physik*),” with the geo-cosmic disorder and turmoil of the planet and the universe.<sup>42</sup> And if the wise in Hemsterhuis is one who discerns beauty in contingency, then philosophy, too, instead of upholding the Enlightenment project of self-assertion, might join poetry in affirming cosmic experimentation and irony. This is what it might mean to reconfigure philosophy and poetry from the standpoint of the Moon, or of the deeper unity of the Sun and the Moon as symbolizing two interrelated aspects of the one infinite universe. This standpoint which Hemsterhuis approaches but does not quite reach is, I would suggest, where Romantic cosmism begins.

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<sup>41</sup> Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 18: 163. Schlegel, however, seems to subscribe in these notes not to the capture theory but a co-formation theory of the origin of the Moon.

<sup>42</sup> Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 16: 282.

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