Overview

The aim of this research program of the Canadian Research Chair in Transcendental Philosophy is to re-examine the relevance of the philosophical paradigm invented by Kant at the end of the German Enlightenment (the ‘transcendental’ element), and which was also extended and subverted during the romantic and idealist period. During the course of the last two centuries the reception of this philosophy has been primarily twofold. On the one hand, researchers have attempted to identify (if possible definitively) the nature of its epistemological revolution by classifying it using the traditional categories (idealism, realism, skepticism, etc.). On the other hand, one sought to situate (also if possible definitively) the ontology deployed by the transcendental undertaking in either an explicit or implicit manner (by inscribing it for example in the metaphysics of subjectivity). This research program takes issue with this twofold restriction vis-à-vis the transcendental. It is not that these receptions are illegitimate as such, but rather that they too often overlook the actual institutive or constructive scope of transcendental writing and omit the perspectivist dynamic that underlies it. The present research project therefore aims at rethinking transcendentalism as a radical philosophy of the imagination. Here different epistemological and/or ontological points of view are to be considered as the singular embodiments or “effects” of a free reflexive activity that is actually the transcendental act. Hence, it is a question of rethinking the nature and meaning of the transcendental gesture today.

Research Program

This research program may be viewed as an intensification on the one hand, and as an extension on the other, of the philosophical questioning that simultaneously informed and remained in part an obstacle in my early research. Accordingly, the present program is twofold, the first aspect of the project supports and renders legitimate the second aspect. At a first level (A), my project concerns the genesis and fate of the imagination in classical German philosophy and in German romanticism, topics primarily belonging to the field of the history of philosophy. This study of the imagination has a double extension: firstly, an investigation relating to the problem of nothingness and negativity in classical German philosophy; and secondly, an inquiry into the articulation of transcendentalism and historicism in German romantic philosophy. At a second level (B), I reflect on the possibility – beyond the strict reference to history – of a constructivist and perspectivist transcendentalism, that is confronted with the problem of fiction as its essence, and that is chiefly
oriented toward the domain of philosophical anthropology. It is therefore important for me to justify this innovative approach to transcendental philosophy without falling into relativism. I do this by highlighting the complicity that it forges between the invention of an *a priori* legality and its most rigorous deduction. At a time when the strictest realism imposes itself as the sole legitimate reference, both in continental philosophy and in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, such an orientation differs by its intent to breathe new life into the original impulses of *klassische deutsche Philosophie* and Romantik. To the extent that this research program simultaneously engages with the history of German philosophy and is supported by external insights, it opens up a vast field of research in terms of the mobilized *corpus*, yet is well defined with regard to the precise expectations emerging from the proposed approach. It therefore proposes to bring together numerous researchers at the highest level in both a Canadian and international context.

**(A)** The Chair first of all attempts to explain the diversity and inventiveness of the works of modern German philosophy in terms of their multiple ways of engaging with, critiquing and reconstructing the Kantian theory of the transcendental imagination, presented for the first time in the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, a text that constituted the birth of transcendental philosophy. A critical reworking of this theory occurs both among the philosophers of the German idealist tradition (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) and the philosophers, poets, novelists and scientists of Jena romanticism (the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Tieck, etc.). Following the most rigorous conceptual and methodical lines of argumentation, we will also try to describe and characterize the different theories of the imagination developed in the works of these authors, by underscoring the manner in which they relate to the manifold modes of the life of consciousness in general (sensation, emotion, perception, language, etc.), or the essential ideas at that time, such as being or the absolute. The chosen *corpus* permits a determination of the different “idealist” models inaugurated during this particularly auspicious period of German philosophy and culture: the transcendental idealisms of Kant, Fichte and the early Schelling, the magical idealism of Novalis, Schlegel’s historicized transcendentalism, the various forms of speculative idealism in Hegel and the late Schelling, etc. Naturally, throughout this work we will not hesitate to question the received classifications of the roles and designations. Precisely from the respective theories of the imagination we will show how the roles are sometimes exchanged, revealing a much more complex picture than the traditional history of philosophy attributes to it. In this respect the reference to “idealism” here ceases to be valid as an intangible landmark compared with that of perspectivism (see below). We will demonstrate how in each of these authors the theory of imagination is a focus of philosophical reflection in its transcendental and speculative stakes – a focus often stated and admitted, but also sometimes hidden or minimized (including by the authors themselves). In my view a research project of this kind on the imagination may greatly profit from an examination of the concrete problem of the image. Indeed, it would be hazardous to reflect on the productive activity (the imagination) without investigating the finished product (the image). All the idealistic and romantic thinkers have a relationship with the image (*Bild*), the representation (*Vorstellung*), the phenomenon (*Phänomen* or *Erscheinung*), not to mention the appearance (*Schein*) – for each of these concepts condenses the complexity of the imagination itself – that is often very ambiguous and which we will explore.

Our proposed methodological approach is simultaneously classical and innovative. To begin with, it is classical to the extent that it adopts the legacy of “standard” methods validated by international research in the history of philosophy. In this sense, our first task is that of a genetic clarification of the concepts employed by the authors in their respective discursive contexts. Our aim is to single out and analyze the concepts relevant to the topic, then identify the specific argumentative structures of the different authors, to subsequently reveal both the upper bound elements of the unity and the coherence of philosophical theories, as well as the contradictory motifs
and residual tensions in the texts, in which the fruitfulness of the latter is to be examined. On the other hand, my proposed methodology is also innovative. I consider it important to approach the uniqueness of the different types of discourses without reducing philosophical writing and literature to mere “conceptions” of the imagination, to contents of a thesis, or even to a “doctrine”. During the course of carrying out the aforementioned conceptual and argumentative clearing of the terrain, in my view it is essential to conceive of the different processes of writing as creative or performative practices. Hence, my aim is to modify the manner in which one usually considers the texts, particularly philosophical texts, by drawing upon their poiesis, as was intended in romanticism. In other words, it is appropriate to study writing strategies and devices; far from being a simple dressing for the concept, they are constitutive of the “thing itself” and wholly participate in the engendering of philosophical meaning by “producing the effect”. In this context it is imperative not to remain at mere thematic presentations of the imagination, but rather to pursue the paths in which the imagination is integrated into the entire philosophical approach and literature of German idealism and romanticism, sometimes in an awkward position with the “doctrines” of the imagination proposed by the different thinkers. Understanding the imagination as constitutive of philosophical discourse does not weaken the rigor of the demonstrations, but is consistent with its transcendental characterization (in particular in Kant and Fichte) as the center of consciousness in general; the imagination then becomes the reflective agent par excellence, through which the different strata of thought are generated. Consequently, we cannot understand the performativity of reflexive discourse itself without attempting to analyze the style and formal writing strategies of this discourse, viewed as a singular and performative “practice” of the imagination.

Our reflection on the imagination in romantic and idealistic Germany aims to be both “theoretical” and “practical” – in the sense of poiesis – and will be extended and intensified in two ways in keeping with this same methodological requirement. The first investigation specifically relates to German idealism, the second to German Romanticism:

1) Firstly, we will further examine the connection between the creative imagination and nothingness, insofar as it appears at the core of classical German philosophy. In fact, it seems impossible to think of sensible life articulated by the imagination without encountering the problem of emptiness, nothing or nothingness. Kant’s work forms the fulcrum of a comprehensive reassessment of the thought of nothingness in modern Germany. The fundamental question of Western metaphysics up to Leibniz was stated as follows: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Until then there is the certainty that our primary object is being – although there is a long tradition running in parallel, dating back at least to Plato’s Sophist and down to Meister Eckhart, which harbors doubts about such a conviction. Notwithstanding, on a speculative level classical German philosophy is the first to wholly call it into question. With Kantianism, the thought of nothing penetrates to the heart of metaphysics and is inextricably bound up with a critique of metaphysics. If according to Kant the highest transcendental concept is the concept of an object in general, since it grounds – and therefore logically precedes – the opposition between the possible and the impossible, thereby establishing the very form of what may be thought, such a concept appears inseparable from the concept of nothing. Henceforth, transcendental philosophers must first ensure that the object they are treating is a “something” because it can just as well be a “nothing”. This is why the table of categories also holds for “nothingness”, as indicated in the famous “table of nothing” drawn up by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. We can no longer answer Leibniz’s question by appealing to a higher being, namely God, that is to say, by still appealing to being. The determination of being as objectivity requires that one traverse nothingness in order to pose the question of the very possibility of God. From An Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Quantities into Philosophy, up until the “Antinomies” of the first Critique, passing through the “table of nothing”,

3
there are different sequences of Kantian thought on the concept of the negative that I propose to precisely relate to the problem of the imagination. It is a question of examining how the latter itself establishes its coordinates with nothingness and freely imagines its own (im)possibility by passing judgment on its ability or inability to administer temporality at the level of nothingness.

Of course, in a Kantian context one cannot say that nothingness has its own “life”, as it were, insofar as it chiefly appears as the “remainder”, the negative side of “possible experience”. However, this is no longer the case in German idealism. We will study in particular the fate of this problem in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. The first does not renounce the vows of his master Kant to complete the project of transcendental philosophy; the two others deliberately exit the transcendental framework in order to attain speculative reason. This divergence has serious consequences for their respective conceptions of finitude. Nevertheless, in each of the three thinkers, nothingness becomes fully constitutive of the life of the spirit. In Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, especially in the versions of the ten last years of his life, consciousness, that is identified with an instantiation of self-reflection, appears to itself as “nothing.” What is attested to in reflection is the fact that the self or I is the imagination of the absolute; such an act of reflective imagining is nothing – because only being exists, as Fichte tries to demonstrate in a Parmenidean manner. All philosophical discourse is therefore led to recognize itself as imagining reflection, or better: as a fiction capable of reflecting and thereby able to generate the conditions of the possibility of a consciousness in its fictional core, because it is negative or annihilating. Schelling, on the other hand, liberates the annihilating power of the “obscure ground” of being starting in the 1809 *Essay on Human Freedom*, placing negativity at the heart of the matter and making it the sole condition for the possibility of freedom haunted by an ineliminable metaphysical vacuum. For his part, Hegel questions the “process” of negativity as the path to a determination of the other. We will principally focus on the *Science of Logic*, where the Hegelian subversion of Kantian negativity is most visible, particularly in the *Doctrine of Essence* with the concept of appearance (*Schein*). The main advantage of the Hegelian appearance is to give a real force, i.e. a rational legitimacy, to the Kantian nothingness and to any skepticism attached to it regarding the possibility of knowledge in general.

2) The second further investigation specifically concerns the romantic approach. In this context we will attempt to update the cogs of the subversion of the critical discourse inherent in Jena romanticism. This critical discourse is clearly historicized, mainly by Friedrich Schlegel. As already remarked, if it is naive to think that a philosophical theorization of the imagination and the image could take place independently of all *poïésis* and any *modus operandi* embodied in both a literary (or formal) manner and at the social-historical level, then it makes sense to take history seriously, and conceive the transcendental *in conjunction with* the question of historicity. The romantics criticized from the outset the Enlightenment conception of language as an instrument of communication that is assumed to be transparent to oneself and to others. The act of *understanding* or *interpreting* appeared to them irreducible to the narrow transmission of an objective sense in which the strictly intellectual value purports to be transcendent to words, but equally to the body and to what can be experienced. In other words, there is an irreducible gap between understanding or interpreting the meaning on one hand, and simple objective knowledge on the other. It is why language is deliberately charged, in the view of the romantics, with history, culture and sensitivity, and aims to transmit to others the layers of a sense struggling with the social-historical world as a whole. A meaning constitutively permeated with the other, and from the very beginning, with the problem of inter-subjective relations – a meaning with its collisions and resistances. History and culture, in Schlegel’s view, give the meaning its fundamental unpredictability and the enigma of otherness is always radically situated in it – this is precisely what needs to be introduced into Kantian-Fichtean transcendentalism.
Here it is not a question of clinging to the meta-criticism of Kant’s fierce opponents like Hamann and Herder, who thought they could demonstrate the impossibility of transcendental philosophy, i.e. the impossibility of a discourse with universal claims, by means of the historicity of language. Jena romanticism offers a more subtle strategy to account for the double movement of the historicization of the transcendental and the transcendentalization of history. We therefore seek at once to understand how the romantic writers have re-appropriated the transcendental imagination in the manner of a necessary recourse to fiction, i.e. how they deployed the imagination in the fragment as well as in poetic verse or the writing of novels, while simultaneously demonstrating that the dynamic back and forth oscillation between the transcendental and history innervates this recourse to fiction. We will examine Schlegel’s Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy, but also his Cologne Lectures and magisterial work on Lessing (many of these writings are still unknown to the French-speaking public, not to mention the English-speaking one), in addition to the texts of the celebrated Athenaeum journal. We will have to show how the historicization of the transcendental injects an indeterminacy into each step of a transcendentalism that would otherwise remain a strictly formal auto-deployment. In return, all historical work nonetheless remains a self-reflection of the human being, capable, in its very singularity, of reflecting on the general and necessary conditions of human creation.

(B) At a second level, we will try to enlarge the discussion on the foundations of the theoretical results of the first level. This will be done by not only investigating the history of philosophy prior to my preferred period (for example, imagination in the classical age) or after it (the perspectivism of Nietzsche, Bachelard’s philosophy of the imagination, Husserlian phenomenology of the imagination, and several aspects of hermeneutics), but also by taking into account other disciplines (psychoanalysis, Daseinsanalyse, paleoanthropology, and aesthetics). This aspect of the research program is intentionally exploratory in nature: it represents the horizon of my reflections. My path into the history of philosophy brought me to become conscious of the proper philosophical questions guiding my research and now encourages me today to radicalize this approach. The following are the three nodal points of this study superimposed on the first research level:

1) If transcendentalism – enhanced by various speculative “post-transcendental” contributions – is the terrain where my reflection especially deploys itself, my attention to the performative nature of the philosophical gesture causes me to bring into play a transcendentalism, which I will provisionally term constructivist, against a transcendentalism that is above all directed, implicitly or explicitly, by ontological concerns. For me, it is not a question of disqualifying ontology as such, of course, but of inscribing it in the wake (and not at the horizon) of transcendental gesture in its incessant reformulations. If every transcendental approach is inevitably and legitimately accompanied by a certain ontological commitment, ontology always represents, in the perspective that I develop, the reverse-side of transcendental reflexivity, that is to say, the result or sediment of the constructive process. In my view, the current revival of metaphysics, both in the continental and analytic spheres, is often associated with a philosophical attitude that is problematic: where philosophers consciously, or involuntarily, are led to “declare” (or rather “decree”) in an authoritarian manner what is being as being. And philosophers often do so with a quintessential argumentative approach, only attentive to the logical consistency of a regulated propositional discourse. In this manner, they put – if need be – the Aristotelian strictly logico-discursive logos on a pedestal, from which the Western tradition has largely originated, but they remain deliberately indifferent to the potentially non-shareable character of their axioms (for example: “being is (only) of a mathematical order,” or even: “the real is a collection of the states of things (and nothing else)”, etc.). And this is done to satisfy the requirements of this realism, present in many domains today, including the domain of continental philosophy, and which seems to have established itself as the
sole “scientific” outlook on philosophy. Of course, the reference to realism is in itself not completely devoid of legitimacy, just as little as the reference to idealism, materialism, empiricism or even skepticism (if this reference is to avoid dogmatism). However, it often dismisses a problem that, on the contrary, I situate at the heart of my project, and is from Fichte’s intellectual intuition to the Husserlian concerns about the phenomenological validation of descriptive acts, continuously at stake in transcendentalism: that of the attestation (Ausweisung) of the results of philosophical acts, not only by means of reflective subjectivity, but in reality above all by the other of this subjectivity, beginning with the reader or interlocutor. Thus, the transcendental philosopher is initially not only concerned with defending the right (unique) position with regard to “being”, the “real,” the “concept”, the “sensible”, etc. Rather, their entire approach engages – prior to some ratioinatin rationality – a change in attitude, a practical modification in outlook, which then subsequently relies on and unfolds with arguments that lead them to assert their theses. But the latter still depend on a rationality that is problematically free, that is to say, free to invent itself and be embodied in opposing views of the “world”, the “mind”, “moral action”, etc. How does this work?

The transcendentalism that I envisage is less concerned with declaring than with constructing, imagining, and thereby, problematically instituting a kind of knowledge that becomes knowledge only by provoking in turn (“solicit” or “call” in Fichtean language) the free attestation of the other. With the designation “constructivist transcendentalism”, I do not mean a savage and unrepentant form of relativism: transcendentalism is definitely interested in the laws that organize the field of possible experience. However, my research leads me to ground the transcendental gesture itself in an ultimate practical commitment (in the Kantian sense of “interest”) for the freedom of reason. If reason is at heart the activity of wagering on its own freedom (this is the primary meaning of the tribunal of reason), the laws that it gives to itself must then be the laws of a “possible” freedom before being (and to be able to be) “necessary”.

In this context, imagination is not one simple faculty of the mind among others, but the power to question the demands of rational freedom. Imagination is therefore both the support and the instrument of a freedom always problematically enlisted by the transcendental philosopher, and careful to solicit the freedom problematically attributed to the other. The deluded striving for an irrefutable argument, against the backdrop of indisputable realist evidence, gives priority here to a reflexivity attentive to the mutual freedom of the author and his or her reader; the one and the other are interested in the fact that they are capable of saying “I” in an identical manner and attest to the existence of valid laws for everyone, even at the stage of their free singular re-appropriation. It is moreover the construction and attestation in common that, in this sense, “perform” the “laws”. Hence, the “I” and its “other” reveal, and even “realize”, the transcendental legality as a perpetually radical invention in demand of new attestations, but still capable of “making sense”, or speaking in the name of the universal – “lending its voice” to it, as Stanley Cavell remarks. I conceive transcendental philosophy primarily as an experience at a meta-level, an experiment attentive to the “effects” generated by its own reflexive activity, effects that it turns into anchoring points for its understanding of the universal. Like in the field of healing, one could say echoing a well-known psychoanalytic expression, the constructive process inherent in the transcendental point of view does not commit to ontology except as “a bonus”. It therefore brings into perspective the oppositions in various schools between the different realist ontologies that are presented today as a duty to discreetly override our freedom to attest these ontologies – although this freedom is inherent in transcendental reflection in its indeterminacy. Or rather, the transcendental experience signifies as well the intrinsic co-possibility of these ontologies in the forms of antinomies that have to be rewritten, since each and everyone conceives de facto that it is perfectly possible to defend – or depending on the situation, to fight the weak, strong, sophisticated, moderate or “quasi” versions of
each of these schools, each of these “views” about the world, each of these “isms” – and to be right (or wrong) in all cases. The transcendental gesture, in my eyes, intervenes prior to this: it is genetic and reveals an archi-tectonic foundation. The latter, as the ground that supports us, is a constantly moving foundation; the a priori legality is forever under construction.

2) The transcendentalism that I am promoting fully accepts its perspectival nature. By this I do not mean to offer any kind of blank check for an approach that would have definitively taken final leave of any reference to “method” and its requirements. Since transcendental philosophy is a free reflection on the universal conditions of possibility of the multiple perspectives on the world, or knowledge of the world, it can only present itself as the genesis of a singular perspective from the moment when, without assimilating itself to one perspective among others, it recognizes itself as a specific type of perspective. More profoundly, the transcendental discourse does not avoid the question of perspective and address, as the masters of transcendental philosophy have experienced since Kant and Fichte (“for the philosophizing self,” “for the natural self”, “for the reader”, “from the transcendental point of view,” “from the empirical point of view”, etc.). Such a discourse can only theorize the relationship of the self to his or her other(s) (the reader, the natural world, the social-historical world, etc.) by establishing itself as a distribution of points of view and as an undetermined risk in its encounter with the other, thus turning down any authoritarian decree. Perspectivism is the necessary consequence of a transcendentalism of the attestation as it is envisaged here.

(3) Finally, in my view the most intimate center of transcendentalism is fiction. This has not only to be understood in the sense of the fiction that the philosopher occasionally employs – or in a constitutive manner, like in Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, which sometimes wholly presents itself as a transcendental fiction – but also, like a ricochet effect, in the sense of a fundamental freedom of inventing that is at the core of the transcendental act. This is why it is beneficial for transcendentalism to be understood as a permanent reformulation rather than a static presentation of abstract laws. Grounded in an act of pure freedom, transcendental philosophy presents itself primarily as a freedom to reformulate itself, i.e., also as the freedom to encounter the other in a different manner, and infinitely requiring from the other another type of attestation. Thus, according to my reading, the true place of transcendental critique and its freedom is always the other, since it is from its critical attestation that transcendental critique can exist. In this respect, Fichte represents, since the beginning of my research, a major source of inspiration. Although Fichte precisely was careful of grounding the transcendental legality in the solicitation of the other, he wrote to Schelling in a famous letter of Nov. 15, 1800 the following passage, which is still waiting to be taken seriously, and should be viewed as an invitation: “transcendental philosophy must ensure that consciousness constructs itself, by means of a fiction …”

This triple characterization of our proposed approach means that any determination of the a priori conditions of the possibility of experience relies on an indetermination related to the very construction of these conditions, and to the generation of new prospects, and to their fragmentation, as well as to the interpretative space offered by the transcendental fiction and its reception in the other. Any a priori determination of knowledge should not be plainly relativized by our investigation, but on the contrary, enter in a fruitful tension with all the disturbances that render it indeterminate, open it to the unexpected, for the a priori determinations constitute themselves in the very outbreak of surprise caused in the other by the fiction that he or she is invited to attest. Emerging either from within the transcendental, or external to history or even narration, according to the proposed idealistic and romantic models, fiction enjoins transcendental discourse to reformulate itself and thereby to constantly challenge its own system. In this view, the unexpected cannot be reduced to a modal category based on or necessitated by pure reason, because it penetrates the necessity of any
category that it supports at the same time. A dynamic relationship of this kind between the transcendental and everything it cannot predict, even though it must “make it possible” in return, naturally leads to a philosophical anthropology that is in dialogue with other disciplines and that is released from the archaic anthropocentrism, due to its intrinsic perspectivism. The aim is therefore to rethink the central question of Kantian transcendentalism (“What is man?”, to rewrite in: “What are the general and necessary conditions of a point of view?”) via the detour through indeterminacy that also originates from art, clinical studies, history or paleoanthropology, and natural science in general. To summarize: I will endeavor to situate the transcendental and its requirement of universality with regard to the perspective of the empirical, which always forces us to reinvent the rules of the future attestation, that is to say, ultimately the transcendental laws.