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30 minutes d'exposé + 15 minutes de questions

**“Pensée sans images” (Imageless thought) and “Images de pensée” (Thought-Images):
Jean-Paul Sartre, reader of Karl Bühler and Auguste Flach**

The edition of the graduation thesis that Sartre presented in 1927 invites us to plunge back into the documentary sources of the psychology of the time for which, in the wake of Bergson and with the arrival of psychoanalysis in France, the problem of symbolic thought had become crucial. In *L'Image dans la vie psychologique: rôle et nature* (*The Image in the Psychological Life: Role and Nature*), the young Sartre develops a first theory of imagination that fits in an original way into the debate on “pure thought”. The matrix of Sartre’s psychology of imagination will be presented through his criticism of the work of the Würzburg School and the investment of the experimental research of Auguste Flach, a Karl Bühler’s pupil in Vienna. From the philosophical psychology of the thesis to the phenomenological psychology of *The Imagination* (1936) and *The Imaginary* (1940), we will study the role of Flach’s “symbolic schema” in the description of the imaging consciousness in Sartre’s theory.

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From “Thought-Images” to “image-based understanding”

Under what material conditions did the Diploma reach us? First of all, it should be pointed out that the autograph manuscript of the dissertation has not been located. The document in our possession is a typewritten reproduction dating from the 1970s. We know from Michel Contat that Michel Rybalka is at the origin of this copy.

It is on the basis of this typing of 277 leaves that we published the *Diplôme* in *Études sartriennes*. It provides a well-preserved text to be read as a whole. On the menu are five chapters of unequal size and a brief conclusion, framed by an index of references cited and by an appendix of later fragments found with the manuscript. The absence of the first 4 pages of the manuscript at the time of transcription is noted. The same applies to some local interventions which seemed to be by the hand of Professor de Sartre, Henri Delacroix.

In this sense, from the point of view of the chronology of Sartre’s early works, the pages of the *Diplôme* show an early interest in the theme of imagination. They certainly lack the phenomenological method that would support the original thesis that would be presented in *L'Imaginaire*, in 1940, a thesis according to which the image is a consciousness that aims at an object as being absent and unreal.

The fact remains that, from the point of view of the intertwined history of psychology and philosophy in France, Sartre’s research in 1927, while falling within the particular theoretical field of philosophical psychology, of which Henri Delacroix was one of the main leaders during the inter-war period, is indeed an embryonic but decisive formulation of the future conception of the imagination.

As the title of the dissertation indicates, Sartre’s main preoccupation in his research was with the *mental image*. As will be the case in the phenomenological psychology of the imagination, it is already the refusal to consider the image as a *weakened perception* that motivates an investigation into the true

role and nature of the image. By taking up these two classic questions of psychology, Sartre therefore intends to provide a reformist point of view on the imagination.

From the first chapter, he endeavours, on the one hand, to extract the notion of image from the classical explanations of perceptive activity and, on the other hand, to make the relationship between image and perception more complex by proposing the notion of “*superperceptions*” (*surperception*) of Proustian inspiration.

Chapter II - which is also the longest chapter of the dissertation - aims to clarify the relationship between image and thought, notably through a historical-critical approach that allows Sartre to position himself in an important debate with the theorists of the *Imageless Thought*. Taking the opposite view to their affirmation of pure thought, Sartre defends, on his own behalf, the idea that thought is fundamentally imaging and that there are, in short, only “*Thought-images*”.

This leads him to draw up, in his **third chapter**, a typology of “attitudes towards the image” based on the four major psychological types: the mystic, the scientist, the artist and the schizoid.

Considering that the normal attitude towards the image consists of a hybridisation of these four major tendencies, Sartre devotes his fourth chapter to determining the origin of images with the help of the notion of “personality”. In doing so, he draws on data from the psychopathology of his time, in discussion with psychoanalysis in particular, in order to highlight a reciprocal influence link between bodily attitudes and mental images.

Finally, **the fifth and last chapter** tackles the problem of the specific nature of the image by starting from a critique of existing theories in order to investigate the thesis of a creative imagination which draws its material from kinesthetics and affectivity.

In **Conclusion**, Sartre recalls the psychological framework of his analyses, which are defined between the two theoretical limits of perception and the Mind, and he reaffirms his conception of imagination: for him, it is the entire thought, at the junction of the corporeal and the spiritual, which is imaginative, at different degrees of schematisation and symbolisation. It is from this tendency of the mind to create for itself a lining of things and to believe in their existence that the inner life was born and developed.

This overview of the major articulations of the *Diplôme* obviously does not take into account the abundance of theoretical sources used by the young Sartre, from the scientific psychology of Henri Pieron to the rationalist analyses of Alain, passing through the genetic psychology of Piaget or even through works, now forgotten, such as the bibliological psychology of Roubakine. It should be noted, however, that the theoretical material gathered in 1927 will play the role of a veritable reserve for the works published in 1936 and 1940, especially as regards the use of experimental data collected from the various authors and in personal observations.

From 1927 onwards, Sartre identified the major solutions to the problem of the image, whose criticism would form the nerve of *L'imagination* in 1936. A historical table thus presents the great lineages of Cartesian dualism of thought and image, the Aristotelian and Leibnizian theory of the image as a support for thought, associationism and, finally, the romantic theories which Imagination will pay little attention to because of their ephemeral nature.

By the time Sartre wrote his thesis, associationism, of which Hippolyte Taine was the great French representative, had already come under attack from James and Bergson, and it was to the *Denkpsychologie* and the Würzburg school that French psychologists turned. For Sartre, the theorists of Würzburg extend the Cartesian dualism of thought and image by asserting that there is a pure thought whose processes take place without the mediation of images. Through his uncompromising criticism, Sartre clearly takes his place in a debate with German psychology, which is one of the historical markers of French philosophical psychology.

In this sense, we owe it to Delacroix and his students - in particular Albert Spaier, Albert Burloud and Ignace Meyerson - for having produced the first critical syntheses of the work of the Würzburg school and its method of experimental introspection. Sartre clearly fits into this psycho-philosophical constellation by dissecting the protocols and minutes published in the *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie*. He was thus the first to take an interest in a 1925 article by Auguste Flach, whose “discovery” of symbolic schemes he exploited to the full. But it is also on the basis of this discovery that the young psychologist distances himself from the views of his research director.

In fact, Delacroix’s general psychology proposes a theory of the symbolic with an intellectualist and idealistic orientation. In *Le langage et la pensée* (1924), Delacroix gives the image the dignity of being a “spiritual instrument” by placing symbolic thought at the foundation of all intellectual operations and all relations with the world. This conception of the symbolic is based on the desire to highlight the purely operative work of the mind, through its capacity to establish ideal relationships between things. In this sense, Delacroix turns away from the intuitionism and realism of his former master Bergson. In favouring the latter’s analyses of “Intellectual effort” and his conception of the “dynamic scheme”, Delacroix takes the direction of a philosophy of the mind based on a schematism of intelligence.

Against this intellectualism, Sartre seeks to conceive a true symbolic imagination that integrates the so-called superior operations of the mind. To this end, he crucially mobilises an article by Émile Bréhier, which deals with a problem on the borderline between the symbolic and the mystical, that of allegorical thought. In this 1908 article, Bréhier described the perpetual and deceptive movement of thought, moving from image to idea without ever reaching its goal. For Sartre, one must recognise in these descriptions the symbolic function of the image which is at the foundation of spiritual life and whose “continual failure” is, in truth, the mark of the singular dynamism of thought. Formulated in a positive way, this dynamism is that of an infinite envelopment of thought which never ceases to surpass itself through its effort to understand.

Here Sartre agrees with Delacroix’s analyses concerning the act of understanding, but he rejects the tendency which amounted to devaluing the image by placing it under the distant authority of intelligence, and at the same time depriving it of its own symbolic function. In a closeness to the theories that he described as “romantic”, the young Sartre conceived imagination rather in its co-extension with thought.

He thus aims to account for the continuous “spontaneous gush” of images in psychological life by formulating a theory of *enveloping* and *enveloped* images. Wrap-around images are nothing less than the fundamental expression of thought in all its modalities - including the most abstract modalities such as those of the mathematician’s ideas. This principle of animating thought in enveloping images is duplicated through the enveloped images which, for their part, constitute the scenario of a thought letting itself be carried away by its need for persuasion.

To clarify this point, Sartre draws from self-observation a very telling example of the wrapped image: he explains how, in order to convince himself of the validity of a certain political theory, a spring image had appeared to him to provide evidence for the idea that “a nation that is oppressed gains strength from being oppressed” (*L’image*, p. 143). Through this distinction between the enveloping and the enveloped, Sartre for the first time dismantled a mechanism of duplicity and self-deception, at the heart of imaginative spontaneity as belief and an attempt at self-persuasion.

Such analyses show the extent to which the psychology of 1927 plays an essential genetic role in the constitution of the Sartrean model of an intentional consciousness burdened by bad faith, as established by *L’être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness) in 1943.

More locally, such a genetic role can be observed in the development of the phenomenological concept of degradation. Speaking of the “fall of potential” that the enveloping image makes the enveloping image “undergo”, Sartre describes in 1927 a psychic phenomenon that presents the seeds of what, in *L’imaginaire*, will be called “the degradation of knowledge in image”. Now, the theoretical function of this notion of “degradation” will be precisely to counter the Husserl notion of *Erfüllung* (filling), which Sartre reproaches for yielding again to the “illusion of immanence”. Here we see how old analyses contribute to Sartre’s singular appropriation of phenomenology.

Moreover, after his time in Berlin, Sartre is no longer so clear-cut with regard to the psychologists in Würzburg, to whom he finally concedes the existence of pure knowledge and the possibility of pure understanding alongside, respectively, imaging knowledge and imaged understanding. He thus abandoned his romantic and ultra-symbolist position, which was that the entire life of thought should be developed in images. In 1940, it was no longer a question of “diluting the imagination in the whole of psychic life” (*L’imaginaire*, p. 183), but rather of determining the sui generis being of the image and recognising imagination as an essential function of consciousness.

This being the case, Sartre remains faithful to his youthful intuition by defining the symbolism of the image by the fact that the latter “is like an incarnation of unthinking thought” (p. 216). The analysis of imaged understanding is then based on a definition that *L’imaginaire* (p. 223) takes up literally in the *Diplôme* (p. 164): “Understanding is a movement that never ends, it is the reaction of the mind to an image by another image, to this one by another image and so on, in law, to infinity.”

This time, the phenomenologist no longer has to bother with the discussion with the former professor Henri Delacroix, but he does find the essential “mechanism” - the word comes back surprisingly in 1940 (p. 205) - the mechanism, therefore, of image-based understanding. It is on this mechanism that both the risk of a certain complacency with images and the happiness of invention and creation rest. It is through this mechanism, finally, that Sartre apprehends, in *L’Imaginaire*, the magical sense of the imagination which is, he explains, “an incantation”, a desire for possession.

2. Thought-images As a new paradigm

Against thinking without images, Sartre developed a new paradigm, that of “Thought-Images”. Having unearthed an article by Auguste Flach entitled “Über symbolische schemata im Denkprozess” (*About symbolic schemes in the thought process*) in the *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie* of 1925, which had not yet been exploited by French psychology, the young philosopher could support the idea that thought is fundamentally expressed by a phenomenon of symbolisation. Sartre mobilises Flach, emphasising the great interest in “determining exactly the proper role, movement and conditions of appearance of [the] images”. He thus seizes upon what he presents as a “true psychological discovery” through a critical account in two stages. First, the positive contributions of the notion of symbolic schema are presented through a summary (about ten pages long) which extracts and translates the most significant passages of the article. Then, the discussion of a series of elements that are unsatisfactory from Sartre’s point of view feeds the enunciation of his own ideas. In doing so, Sartre radicalises the notion of *symbolic scheme* by extending his field of action to the various forms of image described by Flach, namely the *Denkillustrationen* and the diagrams and synesthetics, to which the autoscopic images are added. Moreover, he shows that the appearance of these images has, in each case, been linked to bodily, kinesthetic and emotional attitudes so that these images say something about the personality that produces them. With the study of these phenomena of symbolisation, Sartre indicates a path of work that should be exploited in the sense of psychoanalysis.

“The remarkable and too little known work of Flach on *symbolic schemas in the process of ideation*”, as it is still presented in *L'Imaginaire*, was a real thread in the development of image theory in 1927, and constituted a propaedeutic to Sartre’s conception of imagination, even after Husserl’s meeting. Indeed, on the one hand, they lead the young Sartre to perceive the intrinsic link between images and consciousness, and, on the other hand, they initiate the phenomenological understanding of the image through a fruitful dialogue with Henri Delacroix, a dialogue whose development can be found in *L'Imaginaire*: the symbolic scheme would be the “constitution of an object”, an “attempt to use intuition” to “give oneself the presence” of an “absent” object. The schema is subject to the phenomenon of “quasi-observation” and it would be to succumb to the “illusion of immanence” to believe, like Flach, that the subject reads the meaning on the schema. The operator of these analyses of symbolic schemas is the conception of comprehension that comes, as we have seen, from the psychology of Delacroix (which Sartre takes up again in 1940, without specifying it):

“Comprehension is a movement that never ends, it is the reaction of the mind to one image by another image, to this one by another image and so on, in law, to infinity”.

Thus, Flach’s criticism leads to the conception of “true symbolism”, i.e. a symbolism that does not conceive of the symbolic scheme as a “grimoire” on which thought comes to read the meaning.

Finally, beyond the technical discussion of the psychology of thought, Flach’s article seems to give Sartre a more unexpected inspiration, in the direction of the realistic profession of faith which is at the origin of his philosophical and literary project: it is the idea that a city - Flach speaks of Genoa - holds “a special character, a personality” that intuition can grasp through a symbolic scheme. Sartre, for his part, never ceased to seek to capture the essence of the cities he visited - London, Naples, Rome, Venice, etc. - and to make them his own. - Sartre, for his part, never stopped trying to grasp the essence of the cities he visited - London, Naples, Rome, Venice, etc. - by grasping the “adherent meaning of things”, until he found in cockfights the “synthetic scheme” that gave him access to the truth of Cuba.