ABSTRACT. What Mamardasvili meant by “process of knowledge” is not an all-embracing vision of reality accomplished “once-and-for-all”; it is not a step by step procedure of deduction; rather it is an anti-dialectical reconstruction of a constellation of signs put together over and over again by the subject by an act of non-premeditated genius. It is a kind of aesthetic act that makes the sense appear, like a vertical cut in the sequential line of space and time.

KEY WORDS: aesthetics, Artaud, cruelty, Descartes, Kant, Plato, Proust, responsibility, theory of knowledge, topology

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One cannot but notice in Mamardasvili’s account of his initial philosophical undertakings the particular reconstruction he offers of his encounter with certain philosophical texts. In an interview for Radio France (France Culture) he recounts:

I was carried along on the wave of my reading that happened to be, by chance, a reading of French authors: La Boétie, Montaigne, Rousseau, who shaped my adolescence. [...] I discovered most of all the French gift of living, living to the limit of one’s strength and possibilities, intensely, without building theories about freedom, but living freedom – and living freedom through a concrete experience, made limpid and measured (PE, p.24).

The “French gift of living” is what elsewhere Mamardasvili calls “French passion,” meaning the experience of “a person who stands face to face with the world and is ready to carry on
his shoulders all the weight of risk and responsibility.” (LP, p.16)

The question that arises in this regard is how this coincidence of the encounter with French authors and the “French gift of living” or “French passion” oriented Mamardasˇvili’s further intellectual course through the classics of Western thought, from Plato to Kant and Husserl, and in literature and theatre, from Dante to Proust and Artaud.

However, we will not try to demonstrate a linear evolution or a sequential development in Mamardasˇvili’s philosophy. In fact, the problem will be to identify certain transversal paths, certain dominant problematical features in light of which Mamardasˇvili developed his original thinking. These routes have their starting point in this casual meeting with the “French gift of living” and are interlinked through a thematic fil rouge pointing to one another in a non-systematic and spiral thinking.

We will consider one of these transversal themes, namely the question related to the capacity to accomplish the act of knowledge “through a concrete experience.” The problem will then be formulated in these terms: what are the salient characteristics of a concrete, original, and non-stereotyped experience of the process of knowledge? How did Mamardasˇvili develop a theory of knowledge on the basis of a central core linking Plato, Descartes, Kant, Proust, and Artaud?

Because of the non-systematic character of Mamardasˇvili’s philosophy, a methodological and stylistic preamble is required in order to clarify the theoretical motivations that are at the basis of his peculiar and free use of philosophical materials, motivations that spring from his very conception of philosophy in general. We will then analyse – with reference mainly to Mamardasˇvili’s courses on Descartes, Kant, and Proust – the process of knowledge both on the side of the subject and the side of the object. We will set out the way in which Mamardasˇvili defines the act of knowledge as an act of genius that is never completed “once-and-for-all,” that sets in motion structures thanks to which the object is inserted in a system of references ensuring that the meaning of the object appears. We will then consider Mamardasˇvili’s idea of the object as a