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Romanticism and Anoetic Knowledge

Abstract: *Based on examples from Keats's and Shelley's poetic work, this essay addresses a paradox frequently encountered in Romantic thought between a turn to subjective, non-propositional, and sense-based ways of encountering the world on the one hand and the need to express these in linguistically based reasoning on the other. Romantic writing absorbs the epistemological uncertainty emerging from the simultaneous and frequently conflicting strengthening of adjacent epistemological fields like the literary, the scientific, and the economic. Poetry transforms this uncertainty into a key component of its own aesthetics. Seeking to articulate the epistemic value of limits of knowledge, the essay works toward a Romantic poetology of a particular form of non-propositional, not cognitively conceivable or 'anoetic' knowledge. A key characteristic of this poetology is a self-reflexive awareness of the paradoxical conditions and limitations of poetic mediality, an awareness nurtured by an explorative hovering between knowing and not knowing.*

1 The Limits of Knowledge

Romantic literature is confronted with an inevitable paradox: while negotiating, producing, and legitimizing forms of knowledge and strategies of experiencing the world beyond linguistically based reasoning, these forms still need to be expressed in language. Especially within the realms of poetry, the Romantics dramatize ways of 'knowing' and approaching the world which are highly subjective, often non-propositional, and grounded on the senses rather than on rationality. At the same time, encountered limits of knowledge appear to be of epistemic value in their own right. The aim of this paper is to work toward a poetology of a particular form of knowledge in Romantic poetry which will be called *anoetic knowledge*, specifically demonstrated within selected examples from the Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The Romantic age can be considered an age of epistemological uncertainties: the Romantics had to experience the second of the "two great discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture" (Foucault xxii) around 1800 which equally influenced the arts and sciences. This epistemological

break at the turn of the 19th century is deeply informed by the Kantian Copernican revolution and the following transcendental shifts eventually constituting the transcendental subject which increasingly observes and reflects on him- or herself while observing the world. Therefore, the concept of knowledge is under consideration as well:

The Romantic age is an age of seeking and contemplating new forms of knowledge. What distinguishes the period that begins in the 1770s is a sustained reflection on what constitutes knowledge and what its borders are. The nature of knowledge, whether it is in ‘art’ or a ‘science,’ whether it should be ‘philosophical’ or ‘historical’ or ‘empirical,’ whether there can be a ‘disaggregation of disciplines’ or whether the boundaries between disciplines are fluid – these issues were very much under negotiation during the Romantic period. (Fricke, Meifert-Menhard, and Pink 9)

The subject renegotiates the conditions of the possibilities of knowledge, frequently being confronted with its respective limits as already the first sentence of the preface to the first edition of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* acknowledges limits of human reason (99 [A vii]). When Kant put the mind at the center of all philosophical investigation, he at the same time valorized “the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination prior to apperception” (238 [A 118]), an idea that Romantic writers expressed, as M.H. Abrams has famously shown in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, through changing metaphors of mind, often “picturing the mind in perception as active rather than inertly receptive, and as contributing to the world in the very process of perceiving the world” (58). Exploring the powers of the imagination and what the subject might “half-create [...] / And what perceive” (Wordsworth, “Lines” 51–52, ll. 107–08), however, the Romantics also discovered the unconscious, its “unreason” and were confronted with a corresponding “trauma of not knowing” (Faflak 14). Indeed, already the Gothic tradition, “Romanticism’s transgressive doppelgänger”, as Rolf Lessenich calls it, “subverted both the earlier Enlightenment’s and later Platonic Romanticism’s optimism by recalling attention to and exploring man’s ever-present dark unconscious and its everlasting enmity to clear reason and progress” (*Romantic Disillusionism* 14).

Furthermore, the potential of language as means of successful communication and tool to pinpoint the human condition is put to the test. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the ‘father’ of modern hermeneutics and a later friend of Friedrich Schlegel, affirms in 1809/1810 that the “foundation of all

hermeneutics is the fact of non-understanding” (“Allgemeine Hermeneutik” 73, translation mine). Romantic hermeneutics at the turn of the 19th century reflects on the nature of human understanding and forcefully asserts the probability of mis- and non-understanding (Schleiermacher, “Hermeneutik und Kritik” 92). It is “vain”, as Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley declares, “to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being”, if anything, “they make evident our ignorance to ourselves” (“On Life” 506).

In the context of such epistemological uncertainties, “Romantic writers explored epistemologies that questioned rationalist certainty and were similarly more open to categories of knowledge that hovered between knowing and not knowing” (Domsch 331). The Neo-classicist grand narratives of reason and rationality – indeed, the entirety of epistemologies that are derivative of the *clare et distincte*-principle – are under close scrutiny in the Romantic period. Hence Romantic aesthetics and poetics are informed by strategies dismantling reason and objective propositional knowledge. Among the most influential rank the Kantian aesthetics of genius already glimmering in his third *Critique* (*Critique of Judgement* 137 [B 182]), the radical exhaustion of the sublime and beautiful formerly theorized by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and again refined in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* during his “Analytic of the Sublime” (75–164), as well as a valorization of the (transcendental) imagination, fancy, and dreams as alternate means of accessing the world. In these contexts, Romantic literature, poetry at the front line, becomes a *self-reflexive project*, and repeatedly negotiates its mode and possibilities of being in a hovering state of uncertainty, which is expressed in German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel’s aesthetic theory as the concept of Romantic irony between 1799 and 1801.¹ Romantic literature absorbs the epistemological uncertainty of its time and transforms it into a key component of its own aesthetics and poetics.

A possible reason for these epistemological insecurities could furthermore be traced back to the broader context in which the discourse of the arts and sciences was situated. As Jon Klancher has shown, the Romantic period was marked by the explosion of several institutions of arts and

1 For a discussion of the transferability of German Romantic thinking to English Romanticism see Mellor.

sciences, for example, “the Royal Institution (opened in 1800), the British Institution (1805), the London Institution (1806), as well as the Surrey (1808), Russell (1808), and Metropolitan (1823) Institutions among others” (1). These institutions had a deep impact on the discourses of the arts and sciences and their production, circulation, and legitimization of knowledge. However, “fields like the literary, the artistic, the scientific, or the economic emerged from the early nineteenth century with dramatically uneven criteria of what counts as ‘knowledge’ and which of these fields could most strongly lay claim to it” (4). The instability or even “*contingent* character” (12) of such institutions, the function of which ideally would have been to stabilize knowledge, is also reflected in unstable concepts of knowledge within Romantic writing.

Richard Holmes has aptly described the age of Romanticism in his eponymous book as an *Age of Wonder*, and this wonder can, firstly, be related to the manifold discoveries and inventions within the natural sciences in such fields as “astronomy, geology, physics, aeronautics, meteorology, chemistry, and geography” (Fricke, Meifert-Menhard, and Pink 13) which are recurrently discussed in Romantic poems as the “Preromantic and Romantic poets wrote their works in the midst of a lively dialogue with science” (Lessenich, “Erasmus” 167). This cannot only be discerned clearly in the works of male and female British Romantics alike, for example in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* and Charlotte Smith’s late poem “Beachy Head,” to name but two female Romantic writers, but also within early German Romanticism when, for example, Novalis aimed at a synthesis of the most recent sciences and poetry – perhaps most powerfully represented in Klingsohr’s fairy tale at the end of Novalis’s novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (232–58).

Secondly, the Romantic period can be conceived of as an age of wonder in a different sense. In one of *the* founding documents of Western epistemology, in Plato’s *Theaetetus* – where Socrates makes very clear that he is ignorant of what knowledge might be² – Plato famously argues that

2 In this Platonic dialogue, Socrates affirms: “I can’t get a proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is” (161 [*Theat.* 146a]). As Andrew Bennett adds, “he is not joking. It’s a principle that Socrates holds and holds to, even unto death” (10). In the *Theaetetus*, Plato lets Socrates discuss three definitions of

wondering is precisely “where philosophy begins and nowhere else” (173 [Theat. 155d]). From Blakean innocence to sublime experience, the Romantics are frequently dealing with this wonder in the Platonic sense of *thaumazein*, “the feeling of astonishment and wonder which triggers off the process of questioning and reflection in the first place” (Richter 155, translation mine). Wonder and not knowing, in other words, are ultimately productive of knowledge and understanding – an idea that is expressed in Plato’s “famous Socratic *docta ignorantia*” as the “knowledge of not knowing” (Gadamer 356).

Uncertainty with regard to the question of what constitutes knowledge, let alone what knowledge really *is*, is not merely an issue within Romanticism, (re)surfacing particularly in Romantic poetry and poetics: up until now, there is no unified consensus among philosophers and literary scholars of what constitutes knowledge, much less an ultimate definition of the term (Quinton 91–101; Borgards et al. 1). However, there have been several approaches to delineate the concept of knowledge. A distinction by now generally agreed upon is a basic differentiation between a theoretical knowledge and a practical knowledge. Such an analytical approach to the concept of knowledge has been proposed by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*, where he distinguishes between *knowing that* and *knowing how*. While theoretical knowledge (*knowing that*) is a propositional knowledge based on facts, practical knowledge (*knowing how*) indicates “an ability composed of skills, capabilities, and expertise that inscrutably defies propositional articulation and analysis,” as Günter Abel specifies (246). These two forms of knowledge have found their equivalents, albeit with slight alterations, in concepts of an explicit and an implicit or tacit knowledge developed by Michael Polanyi. Explicit knowledge is “capable of being clearly stated” (*The Tacit Dimension* 22). The notion of a tacit knowledge, conversely, is based on the “fact that *we can know more than we can tell*” (4). This knowledge cannot be clearly represented or verbalized in language (Ernst and Paul 13). Both forms of knowledge do not necessarily exclude each other, although this is often the case. Indeed, the theoretical knowledge of

knowledge, namely a) knowledge as perception, b) knowledge as true belief, and c) knowledge as true belief with an account. Socrates ultimately rejects all of these definitions and the *Theaetetus* thus ends in an aporia.

an action might even result in its failure, as Abel illustrates with the example of a “ballerina who, in the midst of her refined motions, begins to reflect on how she manages to make these motions successfully instantly loses her grace” (246). This threat of “paralysis through analysis” (246) is similarly mentioned by Polanyi because “the damage done by the specification of particulars may be irremediable” (*The Tacit Dimension* 19), indeed, a “[d]estructive analysis,” as he calls it, “may often result in explaining away quite genuine practices or experiences” (*Personal Knowledge* 51).

Abel’s example also reveals that knowing *how* to do something is equivalent to Heidegger’s concept of understanding, which he in *Being and Time* delineates as a practical ability (134). In order to use the winding mechanism of a mechanical watch (knowing how to wind the watch), it is not necessary to have the theoretical knowledge that the mainspring, balance wheel, and escapement mechanism work together. The concept of knowledge can thus be understood in a narrow (*knowing that*) and a broad sense (*knowing how*). Abel defines knowledge in the narrow sense as “knowledge that is methodically gained, organized, and bound to truth and justification. It is necessary to be able to speak of this knowledge and to be able to express, communicate, intersubjectively verify, and *salva veritate* substitute it in propositions” (247). The broad concept of knowledge, on the other hand, entails “the ability to grasp and appropriately comprehend what a given something is about” (247). And yet the Romantics not only explore ways of knowing far from being “methodically gained,” but also accept approaches to the world in which it is not even necessary to “appropriately comprehend” something (247). These ways of knowing lead to an *anoetic knowledge*, the contours of which shall be delineated in the following.

How can the adjective ‘anoetic,’ which means ‘beyond’ or ‘away from’ thinking and reason, be related to knowledge in the first place? Is not knowledge particularly characterized as an outcome of thinking?³ While

3 Similarly, Dieter Mersch claims in his recent research on the *Epistemologies of Aesthetics*: “Since antiquity, the concept of ‘thought’ has been predicated on ‘dialectics’ or ‘exegesis’ in the sense of ‘speaking out’ or ‘leading out,’ open to interpretation and thus to discussion. From the beginning, language is hence the ruling regime; knowledge and the truth thereof are subject to the sentence or, more precisely, to the *apophantic* judgment and its interpretation. Only that which can

the adjective ‘anoetic’ is used in psychology and the study of consciousness to describe “non-knowing states of consciousness” (Roediger III, Rajaram, and Geraci 254), it is also used by pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, when he speaks of “‘consciousness’ as an anoetic occurrence” which is “consciousness wherever meanings do not exist; that is to say, apart from the existence and employment of signs, or independently of communication” (298). “Sentiency,” claims John Dewey, “in itself is anoetic” (259), it precedes philosophical concepts and language. In a discussion of Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics, Jim Garrison emphasizes:

We are living participants in the course of cosmic events, not disembodied spectators. Therefore, we bear many relations with the world around us. Our primary relation to existence is not mediated cognitive knowing; rather, it is one of the immediate presence of anoetic being and having. We sustain many intimate relations to existence, including doubt, joy, melancholy, despair, tragedy, reverence, amusement, fear, confusion, and hope whose qualities we feel long before we ever think them. Experienced situations are anoetically given; all the rest is taken or created. (40)

I argue that anoetic knowledge, which is not reducible to practical or tacit knowledge, is non-propositional, and, at the same time, at a distance to thinking, reason, and language. It might eventually *provoke* (and continually resist) the regime of language and thought, but it has its mode of being elsewhere: it has deep affinities to the nature of aesthetic experience which can be conceived of, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has shown, “as an oscillation (and sometimes as an interference) between ‘presence effects’ and ‘meaning effects’” (2). Just as the relationship between (hermeneutic) understanding and non-understanding can be understood as a process of oscillation, in which both poles are ideals or extremes – it is improbable to understand everything at once as it is improbable to understand nothing at all – so can the relationship between knowing and not knowing be understood in this sense. “Instead of mere ignorance, there is uncertainty, which is not *knowing*, but still more than ‘not knowing’”, as Sebastian Domsch puts it, highlighting the “fluid continuity between the extremes, a gradation of which both scientists and poets throughout and beyond the Romantic

be expressed *clare et distincte*, as Descartes later put it, is recognized and categorized as coherent, and therefore also *discursive*, and meaningful” (45).

age became progressively more aware” (331). Anoetic knowledge is an uncertain knowledge (hence its resistance to discourse): in Romanticism, it transcends the Cartesian *clareetdistincte*-motif of former Enlightenment epistemology; instead, it leaves the human being in what John Keats calls in a letter to John Taylor a “Luxury of twilight” (128).

The process of gaining this knowledge does not rely on language, but is based on immediate sensual experience or de-rationalized imaginative processes, so that it can be called *anoetic*, because, as indicated above, ‘noetic’ means “characterized by or involving intellectual activity [...]; of or relating to knowledge or the intellect, cognitive” (“noetic, adj. and n.”). Accordingly, speaking of anoetic knowledge, i.e. a knowledge that is *not* (a positive) knowledge and *not* (discursive) thinking, forms a double paradox, and at the same time adequately represents the paradoxical situation mentioned at the beginning of this paper: for though Romantic poets express, and need to express, – by virtue of the conditions of their medium – anoetic approaches to the world in language, it does *not* follow that the approaches dramatized *within* the poems themselves are linguistic and based on thinking. It is, in other words, important not to confuse but to distinguish the level of discursive *representation* with the intratextual level of experience not necessarily depending on discursive thought. To claim that all knowledge production, even the knowledge production of and within the aesthetic, must be based on or be eventually reducible to language,⁴ is to dissolve the Romantic paradox, the tension of which is of key importance to Romantic aesthetics. Romantic poets such as Keats explicitly explore the epistemic potential of groping in the dark, of a ‘blindness’ that would result, in Kantian terms, from “intuitions without concepts” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 193–94 [B 76]). What is more, a poem’s level of *representation* discloses a poetic, *figurative*, and *tropological* dimension of language which, in the wake of Nietzsche and the deconstructive maneuvers of Derrida and de Man, contradicts and always already unsettles attempts of finite meaning attribution. Accordingly, the unsettling effect of Romantic poetry is a particularly suitable resource of representing the *instability* and *uncertainties* of knowledge production that have been outlined above, and which are

4 As Mersch has shown, this is the case within the history of aesthetics from Baumgarten via Kant to Hegel and even Heidegger (61–110).

characteristic of the Romantic age. In the following, I will provide selected examples of the poetry and poetics by John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley where anoetic knowledge production takes place.

2 Keats's Poetics of Half Knowledge

Throughout his poetry, Keats dramatizes approaches to the world based on aesthetic⁵ experiences. As a “dedicated sensualist” (Motion xii), Keats negotiates in his works epistemologies that rely less on discursive thought but rather on the immediate experience of sensuous phenomena. Poems such as “Lamia” (1820) or “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820) can be read as allegories of the nature of aesthetic experience, in which knowledge production is, first and foremost, based on anoetic dispositions of the lyrical I's mind. As I have demonstrated at length elsewhere, the hermeneutic processes of discursive understanding are regularly dismantled in Keats's poetry and yet have productive functions (see Gronau).

Equipped with “Negative Capability,” Keats accepts the limits of discursive understanding and discusses approaches to the world marked by a lack of knowledge, by relative anoesis. As he writes in a well-known letter to his brothers:

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (“Letter to George and Tom Keats” 109)

But what does it mean to be “content with half knowledge”? What form of knowledge is proposed here? When Keats speaks of the “irritable reaching after fact and reason,” he first of all implies a teleological hermeneutic process of understanding. Already this very *process* of attaining knowledge amounting to “fact and reason” is described as “irritable,” and thus connoted negatively. In another of his letters, Keats alternatively illustrates this nervous struggle (“irritable reaching”) when he allegorizes the human being

5 Aesthetics is understood in its primordial sense as *aisthesis*. It relates to the bodily perception through sensibility which “contains the way in which we are affected by objects” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 193 [B 75]).

as a bee thirsting for the nectar of knowledge. Instead of actively seeking knowledge, described as “hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at” (“Letter to J. H. Reynolds” 127), Keats proposes a *Hermeneutik unter Vorbehalt* (see Gronau 87–115) which includes being “passive and receptive” (“Letter to J. H. Reynolds” 127) – a thought also discussed in his sonnet “O thou whose face hath felt the Winter’s wind” (128). The “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,” then, amounts to a negative hermeneutics or a serene acceptance of the limits of understanding allowing for the Romantic idea of an experience of the world unspoiled by cultural reasoning, and thereby elaborating more immediate and sensual strategies in which “a sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (Keats, “Letter to George and Tom Keats” 109). To overcome, and even to obliterate, “every other consideration” in the face of beauty, to accept “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” is irreducible to clear-cut concepts of *knowing that* or *knowing how*. Instead, Keatsian poetics – as the theorem of *Negative Capability* demonstrates – advocates an anoetic knowledge oscillating between passive aesthetic experience (*Widerfahrnis*) and an ateleological half knowledge (“uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”) in favor of renouncing “fact and reason” as the ultimate goals of knowledge production.

Keats’s late poem “Lamia” serves as a case in point, as it experiments with approaches to the world beyond “fact and reason” and negotiates the relationship between beauty and the possible knowledge thereof. The long romance can, as indicated above, be read as allegorizing a critique of a purely theoretical knowledge of the beautiful or aesthetic object. In this poem, the youth Lycius falls in love with the fair Lamia of whom it is unclear whether she is a serpent or a woman. Instead of enabling Lycius to produce a proper representational grasp of her in the order of classificatory discourse, Lamia throughout the poem overpowers Lycius’s reason and understanding by nonhermeneutic presence effects so that his love relationship with her is sensuous and imaginative. His knowledge of her is, therefore, aesthetic rather than rational. It is only because of the intrusion of Apollonius who is representative of what the Keatsian unreliable narrator in a metaleptical moment of the poem famously, or perhaps infamously, decries as “cold philosophy” that Lycius’s and Lamia’s wedding and union ultimately fails:

[...] Do not all charms fly
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
 There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
 We know her woof, her texture; she is given
 In the dull catalogue of common things.
 Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
 Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
 Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
 The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. (ll. II.229–37)

The rhetorical question at the beginning of this narrative metalepsis can be read as ideological commentary reflecting the suspicion of successful scientific fields, such as Newtonian physics – which Keats felt had “destroyed all the Poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to a prism” (Haydon 173) – as well as of other mechanistic and rational philosophies that Wordsworth had already vilified in “The Tables Turned” by proclaiming: “we murder to dissect” (48, l. 28). In Romanticism, this dissection metaphor reveals itself in a variety of anatomical shapes, for example in William Hazlitt’s “clip[ping] the wings of Poesy” (“On Poetry in General” 18), a metaphor the narrator also adopts in “Lamia” (cf. l. II.234), and in German literature of this time, for example in Goethe’s poem “Die Freuden” (19) or in Novalis’s novel fragment *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (101).

The implications of the narrator’s commentary go one step further: knowing the “woof” and the “texture” of the rainbow, i.e. performing a taxonomical *critique* of it in order to list the component parts in a “dull catalogue of common things” (*analysis* in its etymological root sense) amounts to “Conquer[ing] all mysteries by rule and line.” The attack on Newton’s experiments with the diffraction of light through a prism is obvious, the “rule and line” simultaneously calling into mind William Blake’s paintings *Newton* (1795/1805) and *The Ancient of Days* (1794), in which Newton and Urizen (a pun on ‘your reason’), respectively, are illustrated with a compass setting out to measure “by rule and line” – if we transfer this to the context of the poem “Lamia” – the nature of an aesthetic object. Lamia herself is portrayed as rainbow-colored within the poem (cf. ll. I.47–56) so that her iridescent dazzling beauty, her “phenomenal *indeterminacy*” (Seel 53) becoming obvious in several passages of the poem (esp. ll. I.47–56), results for Lycius in an epistemic indeterminacy and eventually proves to be unfit

for precise propositional expression. The topos of the incomprehension of the beautiful is, of course, at least as old as 18th-century aesthetics in the wake of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* and the idea of sensuous knowledge beyond or preceding the workings of reason. But as a rainbow, Lamia is also "awful" in that she appears as a sublime phenomenon overpowering Lycius's reason, evading all finalizing description.

A rainbow is a particularly apt symbol of the theoretical *and* practical intangibility of an aesthetic phenomenon. As philosophical language needs to distance itself from the beautiful (as Keats's Romantic allegory suggests), so does a viewing subject need to be spatially distanced from a rainbow in order to perceive this phenomenon in the first place. This is why all efforts to find the 'origin' or 'end' of it are as vain as is accounting for the beauty of the rainbow by means of its microscopic inspection and dissection into a wide array of wavelengths. Heidegger states in "The Origin of the Work of Art" more than a hundred years later: "Color shines and wants only to shine. If we try to make it comprehensible by analyzing it into numbers of oscillations it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained" (25).

Thus, after Lycius's several failed attempts to produce a secure knowledge of the Lamia figure (he inquires, for example, how her identity is constructed, a question which she artfully evades), the final theoretical knowledge brought by Apollonius that she is indeed a serpent, and expressing this clearly and distinctly in language ("A Serpent!" l. II.305), leads to Lamia's dissolution and Lycius's death. An ultimate theoretical knowledge of the beautiful, the poem asserts in an allegorical reading, will be paid for with one's life.

Through the character of Lycius, the poem experiments with anoetic modes of knowledge, it plays with a constitutive indeterminacy willfully accepted in a mode of *Negative Capability*. The anoetic approach to the world preceding the destruction of the amorous couple in Keats's "Lamia" can therefore be read as a literary experiment of Keats's poetics of half knowledge.

3 Shelley and the Question of Unpremeditated Art

Percy Bysshe Shelley in his 1821 poetic manifesto "A Defence of Poetry" expressively states that poetry is "at once the centre and circumference of knowledge," and that a major function of "the poetical faculty" is to "create

[...] new materials of knowledge” (531). Yet, the process of *creating* this knowledge is by no means the result of thought and reasoning. “Poetry,” Shelley asserts, “is not like reasoning” (531). In addition, the poet does not know when he is blessed with inspiration, for, as Shelley puts it in his famous metaphor of poetic creation, “the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness” which “arises from within” but where “the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure” (531). This idea does not only apply to Shelley but also to Keats and can already be found in the aesthetics of genius described by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (137 [B 182]).

Just as the poet does not know the theoretical nature of the compositional process of poetry, so are the recipients of poetry kept in an anoetic state as they “are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (Shelley, “Defence” 516). Shelley here revives the performative aspect of poetry which must be heard and read out loud (the Romantics sometimes also *sang* their poems to each other, see Perkins), as had always been the case in oral poetry. In other words, Shelley implies that poetry is *less like a text* to be read (and understood) and *more like music* to be listened to, which demonstrates that “[p]oetry is perhaps the most powerful example of the simultaneity of presence effects and meaning effects” (Gumbrecht 18). The metaphor of the poet as an “unseen musician” who produces a “melody” is thus particularly striking. Indeed, as Annegreth Horatschek has emphasized,

Romantic poetics in England used the non-referential semantics of music as a central metaphor for the epistemological value of subjective feelings to counter the classical opinion that reason provides the sole access to true knowledge. (226)

In his 1820 poem “To a Sky-Lark,” Shelley in a similar manner addresses a “Spirit” (l. 1) “unseen” (l. 20) which affects its auditors by its “shrill delight” (l. 20). While it is true that a sky-lark flies at such great heights and thus cannot be seen easily against the sun or the “broad day-light” (l. 19), already the second line of the poem suggests that the lyrical I does not speak of an actual bird but uses it as a symbol, because, as the lyrical I addresses it, “Bird thou never wert” (l. 2). In the same vein, the lyrical I explicitly

avows his epistemological uncertainty in “What thou art we know not” (l. 31) – another instance of what Timothy Webb would have called Shelley’s “extraordinary predilection for the negative” (694) as Shelley’s poetry and poetics are full of negations and negative particles.

As Catherine Runcie suggests, “Shelley’s skylark is carefully worked up to be referential with nothing material, nothing possible in reality as we know it. The skylark is not actual” (210; see also Ludwig 175). Although it is possible to say that the skylark is, as a symbol and as “Spirit” (l. 1), immaterial, its effects on the listener are not. Several instances within the poem support the assumption that the knowledge of the bird’s “presence” (l. 35) is gained by the senses, and thus indeed material. Above all, the bird can be heard loudly: “I hear thy shrill delight” (l. 20), “All the earth and air/With thy voice is loud” (ll. 26–27), and “from thy presence showers a rain of melody” (l. 35) are all references to the sense of hearing. Like the unseen poet of the “Defence” or the emblematic nightingale in Keats’s 1819 “Ode to a Nightingale”, the skylark advances to the position of a symbol of poetic creativity, which mysteriously affects the listeners by its “music” (“To a Sky-Lark” l. 60) and at the same time can neither be known theoretically nor expressed clearly and distinctly. This idea is supported by the fact that the lyrical I produces four similes appealing to the five senses in stanzas 8, 9, 10, and 11, only then to add in the 12th stanza that “All that ever was/Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass” (l. 60). With this music surpassing and exceeding even poetic similes, the poem in a deconstructive gesture also confronts the reader with the aporia of trying to express in language what is by all appearances inexpressible and cannot be known theoretically. Before the representational grasp of the bird, before possibly knowing what the bird is, the lyrical I only knows that it eventually affects the recipient with an aesthetic “shrill delight” (l. 20). Like the sublime, which is “fundamentally a discourse of ignorance” (Bennett 56), its temporal mode is suddenness. It happens *now* as the evidence of presence which precedes, and subsequently also disrupts, any form of discursive mediation. Having no theoretical knowledge of the bird is also confirmed in “we hardly see – we feel that it is there” (l. 25). The gradual privation of sight can be understood as a privation of knowledge and corresponds to the highly undetermined “it.” Reason fails to conceptually grasp the phenomenon the lyrical I is trying to describe.

It would be stretching a point to say, however, that the bird or spirit is not able to be capable of knowledge production in its own right. In the 13th stanza of “To a Sky-Lark,” the lyrical I explicitly implores: “Teach us, Sprite or Bird,/What sweet thoughts are thine” (ll. 61–62). This demonstrates that the lyrical I assumes that the bird or spirit has a knowledge and an epistemology of its own not readily accessible to the lyrical I – “*I know not how* thy joy we ever should come near” (l. 95, emphasis mine) – and which it is, therefore, eager to learn as a practical ability (*knowing how*), since being able to acquire as a poet the “skill” (l. 100) of the bird would enable one to produce “rapture so divine” (l. 65). For this reason, the lyrical I in the last stanza of the poem again requests: “Teach me half the gladness/That thy brain must know” (ll. 101–02). Being taught only “half the gladness” of the bird’s “brain” would result, as the lyrical I happily acknowledges, in a poetry full of “harmonious madness” (l. 104) to be uttered from the speaker’s mouth. It is here that Shelley unfolds a deep Romantic paradox, in which the self-reflexive project of Romantic poetry mentioned above becomes visible: the “madness” is the result of the attempt to blend two different modes of aesthetic expression. The medium of the bird’s song is not language but music, its ways of affecting a recipient are not discursive but primarily aesthetic, its aesthetic mode is not representation but presentation – the bird produces presence effects. The poet, on the other hand, is trapped in the prison-house of language and, as the Keatsian lyrical I in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” already does, becomes aware of the irreducibility of anoetic knowledge production to positive knowledge production (*knowing how, knowing that*) and vice versa; hence the madness as a result of the tension created between these poles, aiming at the Romantic ideal of the synthesis of such extremes, here indicated by the adjective “harmonious”. The poet, in other words, is aware of the fact that his poetry will need to hover or oscillate between these poles, and speaking of “madness” as a substitute for this kind of poetry affirms the self-reflexive status of a poetry that knows about the conditions and limitations of its own mediality – a poetry, in short, conscious of its paradoxical status. On the level of textual representation, this paradox is expressed by the *contradictio in adiecto* “harmonious madness” itself, for an orderly state of harmony would necessarily exclude or overcome any notion of disorderly madness (on a related note see Vatalaro 179).

Aware of this paradox, neither does the lyrical I have a theoretical knowledge of the bird's "triumphal chant" (l. 67) which could be expressed accurately in a clear propositional statement, nor does he have the practical knowledge of how to produce anything in likeness to these songs, which, in addition, are no real songs because the bird is not a real bird. Subsequently, the similes the speaker conjures up in order to grasp the skylark and its song remain insufficient. "What is *most* like thee?" (l. 32) indicates that the lyrical I struggles to ever find any appropriate expression to capture the skylark and the assumed knowledge it produces. Instead, the lyrical I admits that the skylark's skill is "Better than all measures/Of delightful sound—/Better than all treasures/That in books are found" (ll. 96–99) which emphasizes that it can neither be *calculated* ("measures") nor learnt through any theoretical knowledge available in books. For this reason, the type of knowledge the skylark produces (it is, after all, said to be able to "teach"), must be a knowledge that exceeds the "treasures" of discursive knowledge which by its positive semantics simultaneously implies that discursive knowledge is not to be negated but that the lyrical I rather wants to explore yet another form of knowledge. This is because the skylark entertains an approach to the world explicitly marked by *not knowing*, for example, by an "ignorance of pain" (l. 75), it "ne'er knew love's sad satiety" (l. 80). Like the famous nightingale, it has "never known," in Keats's words, the "weariness, the fever, and the fret" – it is not confronted with realms "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow" ("Ode to a Nightingale," 458, ll. 22, 23, 27). To be blessed with such ignorance is to be blessed with a knowledge unlike the knowledge about one's own human condition.

In an intertextual continuation of the Miltonic "unpremeditated verse" in *Paradise Lost*,⁶ Shelley in "To a Sky-Lark" negotiates the question and possibility of "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" (l. 5). This, then, amounts to an art which would be both produced *and* received anoetically: "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" are forms of art not only unplanned or spontaneously produced but also abundant (lat. *profusus*) and "liberal to excess" ("profuse, adj."), they are excessive as they are *unpremeditated*, not noetically meditated on, they exceed (lat. *excedere*: to go out, to stick

6 In book nine of *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes how his muse "inspires/Easy [his] unpremeditated verse" (197, IX, ll. 23–24).

out of) the limits of discursive meditation. Put differently, this art is not only unpremeditated in the sense of invoking the Romantic aesthetics of genius but it is also un-pre-mediated. It is not yet mediated or ‘imprisoned’ in language; it is *not always already* mediated, i.e. pre-mediated, by cultural discourses and language.

Confronting the limits of informative and theoretical knowledge of the Enlightenment epistemologies, anoetic approaches to the world, nature, art, and its reception are especially negotiated in Romantic poetry. Its self-reflexive project at the same time forms a paradox or Romantic irony in the Schlegelian sense because any form of anoetic knowledge must inevitably still be expressed in language – to whatever aporias this might lead. Romantic poetry thus draws on the tension and constantly hovers between knowing and not knowing, between knowledge and ignorance and in this process negotiates the epistemic potentials of anoetic knowledge.

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