

## **Treasuring the Self: Romanticism... in Theory**

...at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason... (Keats [1817] 1958: I, 193).

### *Secret Treasures*

It has been rightly said: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”; our treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, §1, cited in Conway, 1997: 60)

The word “treasure” somehow seems to provoke the most “romantic” associations of deserts, islands and ancient monuments, hiding at once terrible and dangerous secrets and promising the most gratifying booty. They are perfect screens of our desires and anxieties, and thus represent the very essence of who we are, i.e. the treasure and me, or the treasure of my “self”, my self as treasure. The notion of the treasure is evidently shot through with metaphysics and is therefore closely connected to the question of identity, literature, meaning, truth and presence – all those questions that have been dealt with by this very specific twentieth-century academic discourse called “theory” and, before that, by the Romantics. It therefore seems promising to look at “treasure” not so much as a motif but as a symptom or maybe a crypt of a very specific metaphysical “necessity”. In fact, it is more the verb, the dynamic process of “treasuring” that might be of help here, and which this essay wants to investigate

through what might be taken as an exemplary Romantic poem – Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”. It will do so in relation to “theory”, which is really shorthand for “poststructuralism” and “deconstruction”, and the question of what their futures might hold in store.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, this treasury and thesaurus of words, promising the instantaneous and complete fullness of meaning, defines treasure as “wealth or riches stored or accumulated; esp., in the form of precious metals... A store or stock of anything valuable... Anything valued and preserved as precious”. While the verb, “treasure”, refers to “put away or lay aside (anything of value) for preservation, security, or future use; to hoard or store up... to furnish or endow with treasures... to enrich... to cherish, prize”. It seems as if the full ambiguity of Derridean “différance” (with its ever-deferring “fullness” or “presence” and its ever-differing meaning from it(s)self as the impossible foundation of “Western metaphysics”) is fully work in the very concept of treasure and treasuring (Derrida, 1982). In the securing or storing aspect of treasure, which we might call the “archival” dimension, the identity of the treasure seems secured or at least determinable as value, its preciousness based on rarity, difference and economy. The very storing of the treasure, however, is future-oriented, based on deferred enjoyment, as a source of desire that is based on hiding. This we might call the “secretive” aspect of the treasure whose essence or truth must remain hidden and postponed. In an almost classical Derridean sense, the treasure, therefore, “haunts”. Its metaphysical drift, like that of any metaphysics, is towards a “hauntology”, namely a presence promised to itself that nevertheless must remain a ghostly and insistent, deferred, “other”. Treasure’s “essence”, one might say, lies in this “yearning”, which is the fundamental drive of its underlying metaphysical humanism – as manifest in literature, and especially

Romantic poetry – a desire to become transparent to one’s self, or to Nietzsche’s fusion of becoming and being, pure acting, life and art etc.

*Keats – Autobiography of a National Treasure*

Literature keeps a secret that doesn’t exist, in a sense. (Derrida, 2005: 162)

Why Keats? Why the “Ode to a Nightingale”? In a sense, both are national treasures, of course, maybe even treasures of world literature. Keats’s life has fired up people’s imagination, while the “Ode to a Nightingale” keeps on puzzling its readers as to what extent it might possibly be an autobiographical crypt. In fact, this combination constitutes an almost perfect example of the idea of the “secret of literature” and the “secret in literature”. According to Derrida, literature harbours an absolute secret of alterity, namely the structural unknowability of the other as other, which is the necessary space for any fictionality to become possible. In other words, radical undecidability between fiction and fact and the idea that literature, at least “in theory”, must be allowed to say “anything”, is what constitutes the impossible “identity” of fiction and possibly the very principle of identity in general. In addition, the “essence” of any secret (literature, identity...) is something that cannot be shared *as* a secret, even though it is the “essence” or “truth” of every bond. Nowhere is this more insistent than in autobiography, which, for Derrida, is the very “locus of the secret” (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001: 57-59), and thus the unresolvable, unrecoverable continuity and identity of poet and poem, or their mutual inscriptions as a “writing

self”.<sup>1</sup> Both, the poet’s and the poem’s identity, are suffering so to speak from a troubled identity, which is precisely not some identity trouble but rather a problematisation of identity as such, maybe even the deconstruction of identity.

Herein lies the attempt to link treasure, secret and self with a “symptomatic” reading of Keats’s “Nightingale” as a textual crypt that challenges the identity of meaning and the meaning of identity. Keats is thus not just any example, he is exemplary of a question that is as old as humanity, if there is such a thing, a question which touches on the very foundation of humanism and anthropocentrism: who (or what) am (or is) “I”? “I is an other[.]”, another poet, Rimbaud, will write, on his “drunken boat”, in 1871. “What is man?” is the question that haunts the entire tradition of philosophical anthropology. Günter Anders, representative of a whole generation of post-WWII intellectuals, speaks of man’s “antiquatedness” (1961). “What *was* man?” Michel Foucault asks in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), and today, when the human is threatened with yielding his or her last remaining secrets, when the door to the safe is almost unlocked, so-called “posthumanists” or even “transhumanists” – often a strange mixture of cognitive, bio- and neuro-scientists and media and cultural theorists – speak either of the evolutionary supersession of the human species by cyborgs and machines, computers, neuronal networks and artificial intelligence, or, in stark contrast to this posthuman euphoria, of a new holistic, neohumanist, or new-age inspired return *of* nature (as opposed to the Romantic return *to* nature).

In many ways, Keats is the incorporation of the Romantic poet. A statement like the one made by Furniss & Bath (1996: 4) is quite symptomatic in this respect:

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. also “Others are Secret Because They Are Other”, in Derrida, 2005: 136-163; and “This Strange Institution Called Literature”, Derrida, 1992: 33-75.

“Keats seems to embody our collective idea of the quintessential poet, and his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819) is often thought of as an exemplary poem”. As the youngest of the “second Romantic generation” (together with Byron and Shelley) Keats and his work are characterised by a short but intensive creative period. His short life full of suffering, illness and loss fulfills all the expectations raised by the image of a tormented, emotional and heroic “genius” of a poet. When Keats died of “consumption”, in 1821, at the age of 25, like his mother and younger brother Tom (just a year) before, he had been a “practising” poet for only about seven years (of which merely five years were dedicated to poetry “full time”). Not having had the privilege of receiving a classical humanistic education like most of his Romantic peers he had first learned the trade of a surgeon and apothecary and pursued medical studies until, encouraged by one of his mentors and editors, Leigh Hunt, he decided to abandon medicine and become a “professional poet”. The works that make him one of the most important and essential English poet, are collected in one single volume, published in 1820 (*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*). Among the “Other Poems” the title refers to are Keats’s great odes: “To Psyche”, “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode on Indolence” and “To Autumn”. His short intensive creative phase, full of promise and potentiality, contributes to a certain stylisation, mythologisation and heroisation of Keats’s person and of the figure of the Romantic poet as such. It also usually leads to an emphasis on something like Romantic unity or “essence”, which literary critics have always been looking for (and have usually found of course) in Keats. He thus tells us as much about historical Romanticism as about changing aesthetic criteria and cultural political and moral values in criticism. Cultural poetics and cultural politics are inextricably linked in Keats’s work, his biography and his reception. As a case study in “literary

treasury”, hardly any other poet than Keats (with the possible exception of his great model, Shakespeare) might serve better to ask the question of the identity of the poet, of poetry and the poetic experience.

Keats’s entire oeuvre in fact could be seen as a self-stylised, spiritual autobiography. His letters are impregnated with his poetic creativity and represent the search of a young agnostic for undogmatic knowledge, freedom and sensual experience. Just like Goethe’s Werther (and his modern followers, from Baudelaire and the *poètes maudits* to Jack Kerouac, the beatniks and all kinds of modern and postmodern “subcultures”) Keats belongs to the category of the rebelling teenager, who is constantly looking for a true and authentic self – an ontological treasure-hunt after the innermost secret truth. In contrast with his somewhat more egotistic Romantic peers, however, Keats seems more reserved, secretive and mysterious, but also more sensitive and empathic, more positive, even “ethical” – the kind of emotional “softie”, maybe even the equivalent of contemporary “goths” and “emus”, and, for that reason, maybe also less obsolete than many of his fellow Romantics. It could even be argued that it is the Keatsian searching “I” that we associate with youth and with whom, as adults, we tend to fall out and by which we might even feel challenged, embarrassed or disturbed.

Literary criticism of Keats usually comes in two forms: one that takes Keats’s thoughts expressed in his letters and poems as cues for an explanation of an aestheticised “philosophy of life”, which usually evolves from juvenile aesthetic (“objective”) idealism to more or less disillusioned scepticism, nostalgia, maybe even nihilism. The other form of criticism normally emphasises the sensuality in Keats’s poetry and stresses not so much development but the inevitable, maybe even intended, contradiction within Keats’s “genius”. This genius is therefore often represented as

ambiguous in order to illustrate the tension between “sensations” and “thoughts” that underlies Keats’s work.

Central in these evaluations are of course Keats’s notions of “negative capability” and that of the “chameleon poet”. Both might be clarified in a close reading of the “Ode to a Nightingale”. One could argue that this ode continues the initial logic of “exemplarity” in the form of a condensation. Romanticism (at least a certain understanding of it) is “personified” in Keats and the further substitution, the example of the example so to speak, occurs in taking the “Nightingale” as some kind of “essential” Keats (other forms of essentialism are of course always thinkable, however, and that is one of the main points, any of these processes are an essential part of “treasuring”, in the sense of a double move of revealing the essence as value and hiding its secret, its crypt or “truth”). First of all, the ode as a genre has of course a long and venerable history, from its Pindaric origins, to Horatian classicism, and to European and English Romanticism, during which it was practised by virtually all major poets (for example, Wordsworth’s “To Immortality”, Coleridge’s “Dejection”, Shelley’s “West Wind”, or Byron’s “Ode to Napoleon” and “Ode to Venice”, or, in France, by Lamartine and Hugo, in Germany, by Klopstock and Hölderlin). The ode is at once a solemn address and an aesthetic self-performance. Usually dedicated to the celebration of an object or a mythical figure, the ode contains a paradox between its personification (*prosopopoeia*) or animated apostrophe (*invocatio*) and its extreme self-reflexivity and visionary character. Keats, who is arguably the master of the ode in English, manages to tailor what might otherwise be a very constraining genre to his very own needs. And in this context the “Ode to a Nightingale” takes up another exemplary function, namely it is here that Keats uses for the first time a form that combines the strength of his sonnets (for example “On First Looking Into Chapman’s

Homer”, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”, or “When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be”, right up to his last work, “Bright Star”) with the intrinsically dialectic form of the ode. He returns to the regular Horatian ode stanza (instead of the irregular form preferred by Wordsworth and Coleridge) and invents a ten-line stanza with a Shakespearean quatrain and a rhyme scheme of *abab*, followed by a Petrarchan sestet of *cdecde*, containing a metric variation of a three feeter in line eight to complement the iambic pentameter throughout. This will be the form that Keats uses in all his “great odes”. The ode with its rhetorical, metrical and rhythmic complexities in fact develops into the ideal form to express essentially Romantic, psychological ideas surrounding the identity of the poetic, or “writing self” and the function of aesthetic, or poetic communication. Keats manages to combine the perfection of the genre with sincerity in the expression of emotion and dialectical oppositions of metaphysical themes (for example, the opposition between art and reality, happiness and sadness, truth and appearance, etc.) which can then be taken as the basis for a general statement about the *conditio humana*.<sup>2</sup> This is precisely what constitutes Keats’s already mentioned but not entirely unproblematic “topicality” and relevance today.

*The Secret of Identity – “Ode to a Nightingale”*

Now... we all do nominalism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom. (Borges, 2001: 135)

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Abrams (1971: 67) on Keats’s “humanistic naturalism”.



The topic of the “Ode to a Nightingale” is of course an established theme, a topos, derived from the ancient myth of Philomela (there are a number of Romantic nightingale poems, for example Coleridge’s “To the Nightingale” (1796) and “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem” (1798)). The poem starts somewhat unexpectedly not with an apostrophe or *invocatio* but with the introspection of the poetic self. It characterises the process of poetic creation with all its metaphysical and emotional contradiction. “My heart”, “my sense” – the contradiction suffered by the poet is at once heightened and dampened as if under the influence of drugs. Introspection, in fact, starts with the extraordinary sensitivisation of the I, or the writing self. Only at the beginning of the first sestet does the direct address to the nightingale occur in reply to its song. However, it is from the start a selfless listening and feeling, not guided by “envy” of the bird’s serenity and happiness. Almost immediately therefore there is a relation to Keats’s ideal of the poet’s “negative capability”, which says that poetic genius cannot be located in identity but, on the contrary, depends on the poet’s temporarily being able to suspend or transcend his self, which allows him to overcome superficial oppositions. Lacking epistemological insight he instead focuses on the essence of sensual experience, namely the privileging of freed “imagination” as the way to the hidden treasure, i.e. truth that lies in beauty.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of ecstatic epiphany is continued in the second stanza in which the poet craves for wine and dance as another form of self-disappearance: “leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away into the forest dim” – a self-dissolution taken up again at the beginning of stanza three: “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget”. The imaginary dialogue with the non-human animal other remains however anthropocentrically motivated, for the poet longs for an escape from the *conditio*

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Keats’s letter to his brother George 22 December 1817 (Keats, 1958: I, 184).

*humana*, the “vale of soul-making”, which is a woeful but nevertheless necessary precondition for self-transcendence. What the nightingale has never known, namely the human knowledge of mortality and finality, the suffering, aging and mourning that constitutes the human species – personified in Keats’s younger brother, whom Keats had nursed until his death at the age of nineteen, the year before: “Where youth grow pale, and spectre-thin, and dies”. Thinking, in typically Romantic, anti-Enlightenment fashion, is equated with the experience of “despair” and “sorrow” – a state of the mind which is not capable of knowing either “beauty” or “love”.

The mood of the poet is elevated in his exclamation: “Away! Away! For I will flee to thee”, whose assonance resembles that of the nightingale’s call. He realises that neither the drugs nor medicine of the first, nor the wine of the second stanza can lead to a union with the free creature, but only the “blindness” of poetry itself (“the viewless wings of Poesy“). The “dull brain” is evoked almost “clinically”, “neurologically”, but its role is deception because it “perplexes and retards”. As if in trance the poet experiences the synaesthetic apotheosis of the plentiful vegetation, the starlit summer night replete with scent and humming. However, in the midst of this sensual intensity, in stanza six, the I becomes aware of the reality of death: “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death”. Half in love with easeful death, whom Keats’s poetry so often invokes, the I comes to. The song of the nightingale recalls the poet to consciousness and a barrier falls between the poet’s self-identity and his non-human animal other: “While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such ecstasy”. This is where the intensifying and reversing role of the eighth line becomes fully apparent. “In such ecstasy” refers both to the poet’s innermost emotional state and to his surroundings, so that the I becomes aware of the impossibility of a fusion or an appropriation, i.e. a self-realisation through

identification with the other: “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – To thy high requiem become a sod”. The nightingale has already started on its requiem for the human while it itself belongs to immortality: “Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges famously used this line to explain the distinction between “Aristotelian nominalists” and “Platonic realists”. For the former, Keats’s notion of the nightingale’s archetypal immortality remains a “secret”, whereas the latter see reality located in the “idea” or “class” rather than any individual bird. Borges elaborates on this in “A History of Eternity” (in Borges, 2001: 135) in the form of a “general history of eternity”: “Or rather, of eternities, for human desire dreamed two successive and mutually hostile dreams by that name: one, realist, yearns with a strange love for the still and silent archetypes of all creatures; the other, nominalist, denies the truth of the archetypes and seeks to gather up all the details of the universe in a single second. The first is based on realism, a doctrine so distant from our essential nature that I disbelieve all interpretations of it, including my own; the second, on realism’s opponent, nominalism, which affirms the truth of individuals and the conventional nature of genres”. Borges, of course feels uncomfortable with the absence of eternity in nominalism, as he explains: “Without an eternity, without a sensitive mirror of what passes through every soul, universal history is lost time, and along with it our personal history – which rather uncomfortably makes ghosts of us” (136). This passage clearly anticipates Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” and goes to the heart of the ambiguity of the self that Keats seems to be struggling with in the Ode and which is highlighted by (its self-)deconstruction. Borges’s subsequent proposal of his own “personal theory of eternity” (137), entitled “Feeling in Death”, almost sounds like Derrida’s idea of a “messianism without messiah” (1994: *passim*): “Mine

However, the poet's self-realisation appears ambiguous – there is both sadness and joy at having refound the mortal self, at possibly having elevated it. It is only in stanza seven that the poet becomes aware of the humanist, mythological importance of the scene: “The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown”, signifying the process of human self-alienation and self-exile, of the existential (Heideggerian) “thrownness” of the human as yearning (cf. the image of the “alien corn” and “lands forlorn”).

The repetition of “forlorn” finally turns the poet's attention to language itself. The first “forlorn”, meaning “vast” or “desolate”, leads to the questioning of the identity of linguistic meaning as such, because the second “forlorn” (“desperate” or “miserable”) clearly refers to the poet's inner state: “Forlorn! The very word sounds like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!” It is not difficult to imagine how a deconstructive reading of the poem would begin precisely here, in claiming that it is the very alterity of language, the lack of identity and selfsameness in language as such, which prevents self-presence, a being-at-one-with-one's-self in the sense of “fullness” or “richness”. Instead, the treasure of selfsameness remains a promise, a secret and a crypt, deferred and always differing from itself, as proposed above, an example of Derridean *différance* – as an impossible but necessary precondition that only ever manifests itself as a trace. The treasured self is and will remain a fortress, a safe, locked. In fact, the value of the treasure lies in its secrecy, which is the inevitable effect of “treasuring”. “Forlorn” designates experience of self as such, its symbol is \_\_\_\_\_ is an impoverished eternity, without God or even a co-proprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes”. However, Borges seems unaware that this proposition itself constitutes a (proto-)deconstruction of the opposition between realism and nominalism.

the tolling bell, the word, and meaning in general. Even though language and thus poetry cannot do justice to the yearning of the poet, it nevertheless remains his only hope of expressing and overcoming his “sole self”, his utterly “decentred” subject. Negative capability could thus be interpreted as the Romantic version of the linguistic process of self-deconstruction (an economy of an ongoing deconstruction of the self, a deconstructing by itself) of the “metaphysics of presence”, which of course is the ultimate target of theory, and Derridean deconstruction in particular.

The elf’s (or the nightingale’s) deceptive spell, however, is broken by now: “The fancy cannot cheat so well... deceiving elf”. The desire for self-identity is once more deferred. It seems as if the poet in the last ten lines of the ode, while the nightingale’s song disappears into the next valley, is completely re-evaluated. The poet’s nostalgia turns into disappointment, almost resentment. “Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades”, for the second and last time the nightingale’s song is fused with the poet’s perception through onomatopoeia. This time, however, it means farewell, complaint and mourning (“plaintive anthem”), while the bird is nestling in the next vale of soulmaking. Thus it is the non-human animal other whose memory trace allows the human I of the poet to experience himself as another, at least for a moment, through deferral and detour. But this is no ontological foundation on which to build, no treasure to hold in one’s hand, nothing that could be made present, but a phantasm, a vision: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music... Do I wake or sleep?” What remains is the ambiguity as most foundational experience of human identity.

*Romanticism... in Theory*

“Keats has no theory...” (Eliot, [1933] 1950: 102)

Job done, one could argue. Keats in particular and Romantic poetry in general may be identified as more or less (self-)conscious precursors to deconstruction. From a slightly more cynical point of view, however, it could be said that literary criticism and (literary) theory – this very peculiar kind of treasure hunt – in the end always finds what it has been looking for. The text or poem was always going to yield (its meaning, its innermost, its treasure, the returned investment). T.S.Eliot and Keats’s modernist critics understood “negative capability” as a kind of spiritual “disinterestedness” (an almost Heideggerian “*Gelassenheit*”, a self-abandoning, i.e. the precursor to the postmodern “death of the subject”). Even though Eliot did not directly comment on Keats’s odes or his poetry as such but focused on his letters (cf. “Shelley and Keats”, 1933), in Eliot’s opposition to Shelley and other Romantic poets, it is Keats who arguably comes closest to his ideal of the poet’s “impersonality”, for as opposed to Shelley and Wordsworth, Keats did not have a “theory”, according to Eliot, and was not even interested in developing one. “Keats has no theory”, however, as befits a true poet, he has, like Shakespeare, “a philosophical mind” (Eliot, [1933] 1950: 102).

In this sense Keats’s poetry must come close to Eliot’s ideal of a “unified sensibility” and the achievement of “objective correlative” in a poet and his poetry – ideals which, according to Murray Krieger, also form the basis of “New Criticism”. Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” must exemplify, then, Eliot’s notion of the poet’s self-abandonment which is: “a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to

something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot, [1919] 1975: 40). However, this process of depersonalisation which is the core of Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry, and which thinks of the poet’s self as a mere catalyst between tradition and the individual talent, between emotion and sensibility, is launched precisely through the contradiction that Eliot tries to overcome, namely the experience of ambiguity, the kind of ambiguity Keats’s poetic I experiences in relation to the singing nightingale. According to Eliot, poetry should not be a detachment from emotion but the flight from emotion, not an expression of personality but an escape from personality. However, Eliot is quick to add that only those poets who have emotions and personality in the first place may know what it means to escape from them (Eliot, [1919] 1975: 43).

From Eliot’s idea of “catalytic” or almost scientifically “clinical” poetry to the idea of immanentism in literary criticism, i.e. the New Criticism, there is only one relatively small step. Neither the subjectivity of aesthetic experience nor the so-called “intentional fallacy” can reveal the treasure, the key to the safe lies in establishing the “objectivity”, that is to say, the “identity” of the text, or poem, or, in this case, the nightingale’s song (to) itself. This objectification of the text, in turn, allows for correspondences between New Criticism and Structuralism, even though new criticism never took Eliot’s impersonality too personally and instead carried on emitting aesthetic value judgments, usually barely disguised in notions like “harmony”, “unity” etc., and went on to draw moral or pedagogical conclusions from these “objective” outcomes.

What poststructuralist and deconstructive literary criticism gives back to the object of aesthetic communication and experience is the process character of meaning

that is *produced* (cf. the emphasis on so-called “signifying practices”), its radical contextuality, its literality as opposed to literarity, and the shift in accent from intention to reception and interpretation. Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” or rather of the incredulity towards the “authorial function”, is the political price (i.e. the persistence of ambiguity) that will have to be paid for the liberation and plurality of meaning and interpretation. The inherent romanticism of this gesture has not gone unnoticed. Its initial radicality is still all about self-assurance, only this time it is the confidence of a split self – the one that loses and finds itself in the process of poetic production and the other, who, through identification in reading, can be communicated and embodied. In this way, the poet’s individualism passes over to the reader and Eliot’s principle of impersonality becomes an issue at the other, the receiving and decoding end. Does an “ideal” reader have to abandon, or suspend at least, his or her personality in order to, like the poet, hear the nightingale sing or even become (one with) it?

At this point one should look at Paul de Man’s ideas about Romanticism, which say that Romantic literature invests general validity in an experience without ever breaking off the contact with the individual self in whom this experience first arose (cf. Paul de Man’s “Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats”, in De Man 1989: 197). Again, one could take Keats as an example of Paul de Man’s idea of rhetorical “disfiguration”. In “Shelley Disfigured” (1979) de Man develops the notion that in Romantic poetry in particular there is a play of figuration in the use of rhetorical tropes (a process which constitutes the very ability of visual representation in a text) and disfiguration (to be understood as the very structure inherent in a text that erases these tropological meanings). As demonstrated Keats’s ode is as much an act of remembrance as it is an act of forgetting, namely the forgetting of the I as a means of



remembering. The nightingale functions as a metonymy, as a trope for the poetic process, which is why the nightingale and its meaning – i.e. the personification of the I – can neither be fully present nor absent. Instead it has a haunting ability, an entirely uncanny presence. Its only point is to create the illusion of self-presence and the guarantee of meaning, which nevertheless cannot be articulated. The conclusion that a deconstructive reading *à la* de Man would draw from this is that the I itself is nothing but an autobiographical trope (namely a *prosopopoeia*) that must constantly articulate and dearticulate itself (cf. de Man’s “Autobiography as De-Facement“, in De Man, 1984). De Man shows how *prosopopoeia* can indeed be taken as the general condition of all language, namely as the permanent construction of masks of human self-identity – a fact that manifests itself in particular through the repressive function at work in the ode’s constant questioning. The poetic I with its autobiographical desire to be at-one-with-it’s-self, or with its structure of *différance*, in fact becomes a constant process of self-annihilation, as de Man says in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*: “disfiguration is the forgetting of the trope as trope”. Since Keats’s Ode is an act of self-interpretation or an “auto-communicative” act, or in de Man’s words an “allegory of reading”, one is allowed to apply this insight to the reading of the poem itself, and arguably to any act of reading: reading is at once the appearance and disappearance of understanding. The price of understanding is thus the annihilation of the I, or permanent self-deconstruction.

The mentioned topicality of Keats, and his modern and postmodern interpreters from Eliot to de Man, lies in the fact that Keats’s model of impossible self-realisation seems to have become the *standard* understanding of any autobiographical I. It is somewhat like the original trope of the modern and postmodern self or subject which constantly finds itself and in finding itself

disappears or loses its self – an endless dialectic deferral of being-with-one’s-self as promise, or, indeed, a “self-treasuring”. It is in this context that de Man’s comment on Keats (in “An Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats” (1966) as a purely “future-oriented poet” begins to make sense. The prospective questioning in Keats’s poetry in general is the expression of a haunting dream whose truth always remains in the future. Keats is the least narcissistic poet of English Romanticism because the deferral necessarily demands a forgetting of self, and *not* Wordsworthian introspection or self-reflexivity. Negative capability for Keats means empathy with the other or others as a replacement for an I, or a kind of self-undoing, but in a positive sense. Nothing is more despicable for Keats than the “sole self” or the “habitual self”. For him the role of imagination is not finding an authentic self but the abandoning of the self, which is why he constantly faces the criticism of being irresponsible or lacking in self control. Evidently, de Man would interpret the “forlorn” in the “Ode to a Nightingale” as that moment when the repressed “real” self, parallel to Freud’s notion of the unconscious, returns, and in doing so, destroys the poetic illusion of an auto-heterogenesis.

### *Treasuring the Self*

We have lost the *mystique* of the self. (Trilling, 1980: 40)

It is Romanticism’s chief merit, according to de Man, to have shown that general philosophical insight has to be rooted in authentic self-understanding, or that self-assurance is the necessary first step towards any moral judgment. It is certainly no exaggeration that the big treasure hunt for the self has greatly intensified in the age of

so-called “postmodern identity politics”. Postmodern society is obsessed with identity and views identity – like its Romantic precursors – as task in the double meaning of “*Aufgabe*” in Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (1968): namely as task (or promise) and abandonment (or disappearance). The abandoning of the metaphysical Cartesian subject leads to an accumulation of minoritarian identities or, as Stuart Hall would say, “minimal selves” (1988). Identity is not an essential given but the temporary end product of a continuous, uncompletable, process, literally a “pro-ject”. Here is therefore Keats’s continued but problematic relevance, because already in Keats are we shown the limits of this somewhat naive self-proliferation and self-stylisation.<sup>5</sup> The impossibility of identity – the self as disappearance and as promise, or as repression – is by no means made more tolerable through loss and celebrated pluralisation. On the contrary, the dispersal of the initial “problem” only increases the desire for self-discovery – i.e. it intensifies the metaphysics of

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<sup>5</sup> It might be useful, in thi context, to draw parallels between Mark Sandy’s (2005) argument about Nietzsche’s fundamental ambiguity towards Romanticism, and Romanticism in theory. Despite Nietzsche’s apparent negative attitude towards Romanticism and art as “redemptive shelter from the suffering of existence”, according to Sandy, “Nietzsche’s own account of the self and world as involving fictions and fictionalising illuminates comparable concerns in the poetry of Keats and Shelley (vii). According to Sandy, the “Keatsean and Shelleyan treatment of poetic identity anticipate a Nietzschean understanding of the self as a site of conflict” (viii). Sandy insinuates the parallels between Nietzsche’s (anti-)romanticism and Nietzsche’s “re-absorption into theoretical literary commentaries on romanticism” in figures like Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, de Man, Bloom, Hartman and Hillis Miller (1-2).

treasuring. The answer to the impossible quest for a unified self, one could argue, is already given by Keats himself, and this answer is, strictly speaking, an ethical one, almost in the radical sense given to ethics by Emmanuel Levinas, namely the insight that the self is itself a kind of answer to a prior question: namely the necessary precedence of the other for any self. Identity, precisely, is an answer not a question, an effect not the cause of alterity – an asymmetrical relation which turns every I into a hostage of the other in all its forms. Or, in other words, the infinity of the I does not correspond to any totality. In opening itself up towards the other in the shape of a nightingale, or nature etc. and in becoming “self-aware” through “facing” an or the other, the Keatsian I also preempts another trend in contemporary literary and cultural criticism, a development one might call “critically posthumanist” (Herbrechter & Callus, 2010), or “post-anthropocentric” or even “post-psychological”. These latest “postisms” seem to find their expression, for example, in cognitive, neuro- and eco-criticism.

Keats’s anti-Cartesian reference to the “dull brain” in the “Ode to a Nightingale” might be recalled here. It seems as if current literary criticism is attempting to overcome the fundamental gap between author, reading and text through new holistic, maybe even new monist, approaches. The holistic nature of the communicative or aesthetic-poetic process is being stressed once again, however this time without recourse to any humanist moral ideal of self-realisation or pedagogy. Instead the new understanding of the poetic process might resemble something like posthumanist neuropsychology. The new image of the human in the age of the demystified “dull” brain no longer clearly distinguishes between the individual subject and its natural and cultural environment. Just as any I is the extension of an “embodied mind”, the body is a network of technical, cultural and natural extensions

and interventions. Conscience, communication and aesthetics literally are complex effects of neural affects and Keats, the surgeon and student at United Hospitals, with its most advanced teachers in the new “brain science” might have sensed this. Keats’s “dull brain”, which belatedly and in a state of perplexity capitulates in front of the immediacy of sensual experience because it ultimately cannot extricate itself from dualism’s imprisonment – consciousness somehow always comes too late, brain and self never meet, even less do they become one. As Alan Richardson in *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001) explains, the Romantic period witnesses the foundations of modern neurology. He coins the phrase “neural romanticism” with particular reference to Keats and especially his odes. One could even go so far, mindful of the Romantic beginnings of contemporary holistic-psychological approaches and posthumanist neuro-aesthetics, as to speak of Keats as the first “neuro-mantic”, or indeed “Roman-tech”.

What does all this mean for the treasure, and the self? Is the age of “brain science” the ultimate loss of the “mystique of the self”, taking up Lionel Trilling’s somewhat nostalgic epigraph? Does it spell the end of literature and poetry, or the generalisation of its secret, its fictionality? Is the Romantic irresistibility of theory a “triumph” or a “downfall”, to recall de Man on “theory” (1986)? Is Nietzsche’s proto-posthumanist image of human knowledge as “beehive” really the end of any metaphysics of treasure and the triumph of nihilistic disenchantment? We shall have to ask the nightingale...

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