

Ralf Haekel

The Soul in British Romanticism
Negotiating Human Nature in
Philosophy, Science and Poetry

Christoph Bode, Frank Erik Pointner, Christoph Reinfandt (Hg.)

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Anatomy</i> | Robert Burton. <i>The Anatomy of Melancholy</i> |
| <i>BL</i> | Samuel Taylor Coleridge. <i>Biographia Literaria</i> . 2 vols. |
| <i>CC</i> | Samuel Taylor Coleridge. <i>The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> . 16 vols. |
| <i>CCD</i> | Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins. <i>Debate</i> (in <i>Clarke</i> 3: 719-913) |
| <i>CL</i> | Samuel Taylor Coleridge. <i>Collected Letters</i> . 6 vols. |
| <i>CN</i> | Samuel Taylor Coleridge. <i>The Collected Notebooks</i> . 5 vols. |
| <i>DA</i> | Aristotle. <i>De anima</i> |
| "Dej" | Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "Dejection. An Ode" (in <i>CC</i> 16.1: 695-702) |
| "Epi" | Percy Bysshe Shelley. "Epipsychidion" (in <i>SPP</i> 390-407) |
| "End" | John Keats, "Endymion" (in <i>KP</i> 64-162) |
| <i>E</i> | William Blake. <i>The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake</i> |
| <i>KP</i> | John Keats. <i>The Poems of John Keats</i> |
| <i>NT</i> | Edward Young. <i>Night Thoughts</i> |
| "Ode" | William Wordsworth. "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (in <i>WPW</i> 4: 279-85) |
| "OP" | John Keats. "Ode to Psyche" (in <i>KP</i> 364-66) |
| <i>P</i> | William Wordsworth. <i>The Prelude</i> (1805) |
| <i>Phaedo</i> | Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> |
| <i>Phaedrus</i> | Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> |
| <i>Psyche</i> | Mary Tighe, <i>Psyche</i> |
| <i>PWD</i> | René Descartes. <i>The Philosophical Works of René Descartes</i> . 3 vols. |
| <i>SPP</i> | Percy Bysshe Shelley. <i>Shelley's Poetry and Prose</i> |
| <i>Symp</i> | Plato, <i>Symposium</i> |
| <i>WPW</i> | William Wordsworth. <i>The Poetical Works</i> . 5 vols. |
| <i>Z</i> | William Blake, "The Four Zoas" (in <i>E</i> 300-407) |

1. Falling into Time – An Introduction

In William Wordsworth's "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", the speaker describes the beginning of life and the awakening of the mind in terms of a fall from eternity into time:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (58-66)

With the moment of birth a gradual process of forgetting sets in and eventually all access to the pre-natal state is barred for the adult speaker. What is striking about these lines is that the soul is not identical with the individual person's self. "Our" soul is described as something that is not us, but "our life's Star", a transindividual principle of life. In this stanza, the speaker changes from first person singular, dominating the beginning of the poem, to third person plural which indicates that the horizon widens from the speaker's consciousness to a general statement on the nature of the mind and the soul.

Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode", arguably the most famous Romantic poem on the soul, embraces many of the complex and sometimes contradictory elements that characterize the concept of the soul around 1800. The "Ode" is a poem about the immortality of the transcendental soul and at the same time a poem about the shortcomings of the immanent secular mind. It is concerned with the philosophical concepts of life, selfhood and epistemology, and it is a poem about the nature of art and the imagination. These concepts associated with the soul all go back to classical Greek philosophy; but the characteristic tension between transcendence and immanence, out of which the "Ode" draws its ambiguity as well as its poetic quality, is the result of transitions in scientific, philosophical and theological discourses taking place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

At the heart of the poem lies a reference to *anamnesis*, Plato's theory that the soul can remember its prenatal immortal existence. In experiencing nature, the speaker claims, a child still has immediate access to divine insights and truth:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,

And by the vision splendid
 Is on his way attended;
 At length the Man perceives it die away,
 And fade into the light of common day. ("Ode" 67-76)

This passage might lead to the assumption that the soul in Wordsworth's "Ode" – and in Romantic poetry in general – is still in essence identical with the immortal and immaterial soul as described in Plato's *Phaedo*. But a closer look reveals fundamental differences. As the "Shades of the prison-house begin to close", that is to say as the young boy grows up to be an adult, has experiences and learns, he forgets what he originally knew; the "light of common day" is opposed to the eternal truth the child was originally aware of. With this, the emphasis is put not on some otherworldly realm but on the human mind and its development.

The relevant passage in Plato states that

the return to life is an actual fact, and it is a fact that the living are generated from the dead and that the souls of the dead exist. And besides ... if it is true ... that our learning is nothing else than recollection, then this would be an additional argument that we must necessarily have learned in some previous time what we now remember. But this is impossible if our soul did not exist somewhere before being born in this human form; and so by this argument also it appears that the soul is immortal. (72a–73d)

According to the Plato, any human knowledge is a form of memory, and to learn is to remember what we once knew before we were born and what was lost at the moment of birth. Hence, the soul still has limited access to the realm of ideas through learning which is at the same time an act of remembering.

Wordsworth's poem, instead, proposes an epistemology which consists of a strange mixture between both the Platonic model and the dominant Lockean empiricist theory according to which the mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth – and yet the poem is at the same time opposed to both of them. For the growing child, who originally had access to the realm of ideas, the process of learning is a form of forgetting. The more experienced the boy becomes, the further he moves away from the original state of the soul.

As the poem proceeds, however, it becomes clear that it is not the care for an afterlife or the soul's salvation that is at the heart of the poem. Instead, the speaker's concern is with the human mind in *this* life and especially with the creative mind of the poet-speaker himself. The main theme is the crisis of the imagination, and this crisis is also the turning point of the poem. Although the adult speaker does not have immediate access to the realm of ideas, he still has the ability to remember his own childhood:

Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be,
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither,
 Can in a moment travel thither,
 And see the children sport upon the shore,
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore. ("Ode" 164-70)

That is to say, the mind can remember remembering. However, this act of memory is also a poetic act, and therefore it is identical with Wordsworth's famous notion that poetry "takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 266). It is not the eternal realm of ideas but their *loss* that gives rise to the creative process, and only in the act of remembering there are "intimations of immortality" – not in the ideas as such. In other words, the concept of *anamnesis* in the "Ode" contains Wordsworth's entire poetic theory of the imagination in a nutshell.

Wordsworth's concept of the soul betrays a focus on the immanent mind and not on some otherworldly ideal. The "Ode" invokes Plato's *Phaedo* and with it the entire classical discourse on the soul; but the poem never fully accepts the religious and mythological dimensions of this discourse. The reference to Platonic idealism is therefore not made to describe the immortality of the soul; rather, these classical pretexts are invoked in order to describe poetry as a philosophical act and thus to elevate the dignity of the poet's imagination.

This very brief first glance at Wordsworth's "Ode. Intimations of Immortality" indicates that the concept of the soul in the age of Romanticism and especially in Romantic poetry, which this book sets out to investigate, is complex and problematic. The many connotations of the term and its many intertextual references create a historical range from classical Greek philosophical and Hebrew religious texts up to contemporary scientific treatises. They cover a semantic field ranging from the individual mind to the world soul, from personal selfhood to a transindividual entity, from immanence to transcendence, from traditional to avant-garde concepts. Furthermore, the Romantic soul is shaped by the changes the concept underwent in the fields of science, philosophy and religion during the preceding two centuries. In other words, it evokes multiple layers of meaning. As a result, the soul in Romantic poetry is sometimes inconsistent and self-contradictory and, hence, cannot be reduced to a simple definition that the period accepted as a whole. Although the soul plays an important part in Romantic culture and literature, it is near to impossible to grasp the entire range embraced by the topic. A list of typical structural elements therefore forbids itself because both the soul and the original and imaginary dimension of Romantic poetry cannot be reduced to such formalizations.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, life, sense perception as well as cognition and reasoning have been explained in terms of the soul. The soul was considered to be a person's innermost self, the definition of his or her individual identity. Furthermore, the soul was deemed to be immortal and, hence, it served as an assurance that the individual human does not vanish after death. Instead of carrying just one meaning, the term gathers a whole range of concepts, all central to an understanding of the human.¹ Since these elements of the soul are never fully compatible with one

1 Paul S. MacDonald's *History of the Concept of Mind* provides a brilliant overview of all the major concepts and theories of the soul from its Hebrew and Greek origins up to David Hume. See also M. James C. Crabbe's edited collection *From Soul to Self*. The following books, all published in German, give a very good overview of the topic as

another, there have always been conflicting theories as to what the human soul is, how it is related to the human body, the mind, the world and God. It is therefore misleading to assume that a traditional unified concept of soul was transformed during the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Rather, there is no such thing as *the* traditional concept. On the contrary, the soul is never simply an accepted theological or philosophical entity, neither in the early nineteenth nor in the seventeenth century, as Paul S. MacDonald states in his groundbreaking *History of the Concept of Mind*:

The history of the concepts of mind and soul is a complex and twisted network of many paths, each path strewn with obstacles, dead ends, false or hidden beginnings, relapses into old ways of thinking and forward leaps into imaginative projection. One of the principle problems is to sort out exactly which issue is being addressed when one holds up for scrutiny any one of the numerous terms involved in the ancestry of the modern concept of mind and soul. (1)

In other words, to state that there existed an orthodox and unambiguous theory of the soul at any time, based on church doctrine or social consensus, is plainly misleading. Suzanne Nalbantian, for instance, is mistaken when she maintains that the "soul metaphor changes gradually from an accepted theological reality to a stage in which connections with theology are drastically severed" (6). The notion that any given period is characterized by a decline or even death of the soul is usually the outcome of a teleological construction rather than a proper historical reconstruction.²

Still, the transformations the soul underwent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are unprecedented in scope and impact.³ Between the early seventeenth century and the end of the Romantic period around 1830, the concept of the soul suffered a substantial change, a "paradigm shift from God to nature [which] helped reconfigure the field of inquiry from natural history to natural philosophy" (Gigante, *Life* 29). The modern scientific system with its specialized disciplines came into being around the turn of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, the soul became the subject of in-

well as its treatment in recent cultural studies: Kamper and Wulf, eds., *Die erloschene Seele*; Jüttemann, Sonntag and Wulf, eds., *Die Seele. Ihre Geschichte im Abendland*; and more recently Crone, Schnepf and Stolzenberg, eds. *Über die Seele*.

- 2 In *The Symbol of the Soul*, Nalbantian investigates the soul in works ranging from Hölderlin via Wordsworth and the French symbolists to Yeats. During the age of modernity, she states, the soul is increasingly described in terms of mortality and failure, although she is mistaken about the soul in Romantic literature which she considers to be a unified theological reality.
- 3 See for a comprehensive overview of the transformation of the soul and its impact on the changing concept of the human: Yolton, *Thinking Matter*. A more biased interpretation is offered by Martin and Barresi in *Naturalization of the Soul* and, more recently, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self*. The teleology of these latter books and their sole focus on the modern secular and scientific concept of the human tends to neglect the more complex philosophical and psychological problems historically connected with the soul. For a thorough criticism of this "Whig history of science" (171) see Rousseau, "Brainomania".

vestigation in several different discourses and sub-discourses. This meant that the soul of the established Aristotelian psychology was split up into its several aspects and functions which were themselves based on the categories laid down in *De anima*: the life-giving aspect of the soul was debated in the vitalist and the emerging biological discourses; the sensitive and the rational soul was discussed in several disciplines such as philosophical epistemology and the earliest forms of what today is known as neuroscience. The soul is therefore subject to not one but several paradigm shifts. In a way, these transformations lead to, and are even synonymous with, the discovery of the modern concept of the human.⁴

The soul in Romantic poetry is part of a larger transformation of the scientific understanding of the human – and of the scientific system in general – occurring during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This transformation of the scientific system and the ensuing changes in all realms of human knowledge are part of a larger paradigm shift that Michel Foucault identified as the shift from the classical to the modern episteme. This change is closely linked with an alteration of the nature of the linguistic sign during the ages of Enlightenment and of Romanticism. In his classic work *The Order of Things*, Foucault proposes that the transition occurring at the turn of nineteenth century is first and foremost a change in the system of representation. According to his analysis of the origins of the disciplines of biology, economics and philology, this transformation of the system of knowledge is also – or even primarily – a transformation of the sign system: "*Les mots et les choses* is, to a large extent, nothing else than a book on the history of the signs from the sixteenth to the twentieth century." (Sarasin 72; my translation)⁵ The shift from Early Modern natural philosophy to the Modern scientific system with its separate branches of disciplines and sub-disciplines is built upon the transformation of the linguistic sign, and the history of the soul is part of this fundamental change in the scientific conception of the human.

A number of recent studies based on Foucault's method of discourse analysis investigate the close relationship between the different forms of scientific knowledge and art in the period of Romanticism. In his essay "Sciences of the Arbitrary" ("*Wissenschaften des Arbiträren*"), the German scholar Albrecht Koschorke shows how in the course of this development from the classical to the modern episteme "the concept of the soul loses its metaphysical status and is transformed into a psychological-psychiatric category" ("*Wissenschaft des Arbiträren*" 33; my translation).⁶ This is, Koschorke shows, based on a fundamental reconstitution of both the scientific system and its sign system. He describes a shift from a classical scientific paradigm based on similarities he calls "image model" ("*Abbild-Modell*") to an "arbitrary or sign model" ("*ar-*

4 For a recent overview of the dawning of the modern concept of the human around 1800 see Haeckel and Blackmore.

5 "*Les mos et les choses* ist tatsächlich in weiten Teilen nichts anderes als ein Buch über die Geschichte der Zeichen vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert."

6 "...wie überhaupt der Begriff der Seele immer mehr seinen metaphysischen Status einbüßt und sich in eine psychologisch-psychiatrische Nenngröße verwandelt."

biträres oder Zeichenmodell"). According to the image model, there exist fundamental similarities between the objects of sense perception and the images the mind produces of these objects. Ancient rhetoric, especially the art of memory, is the discipline categorizing and ordering knowledge according to this scientific paradigm. The faculty that establishes a transfer of information between the senses, memory and the rational mind is the imagination (see Koschorke, "Wissenschaft des Arbiträren" 21-2). In the course of the Enlightenment, with the rise of modern epistemology, this model is increasingly caught up in contradictions. Especially Descartes' strict distinction between soul and body, which in a way initiates Enlightenment anthropology, renders a conception of consciousness based on an analogy between mind and object world impossible. Koschorke describes this crisis in eighteenth-century philosophy as a

sensual shift characteristic for the entire eighteenth century and which – from Locke and Berkeley to Hume and others – dissolves the ontological concept of reality into a number of contingent and solely subjective impressions. This leaves two perspectives. First, one could speak of a process of transcendentalizing the relationship between the world of objects and perception – which ultimately leads to the Kantian philosopheme that the thing in itself remains unknowable and that any sense perception is categorically determined. The epistemological problem of how two categorically distinct entities may act upon one another is thus shifted into an epistemological hiatus. Second, the fact that the ontological status of sensation is rendered insecure opens up the possibility of multiple *individual* imaginative worlds. (Koschorke, "Wissenschaft des Arbiträren" 29; my translation)⁷

According to Koschorke, now, this has immediate implications for the development of modern philology, as he claims that the paradigm shift towards the sensual paradigm leads to the origin of modern hermeneutics, which, as a potentially interminable form of interpretation, takes the place of rhetoric as the dominant model of organizing cultural knowledge. Koschorke's analysis, therefore, shows how the development of the Romantic and the Modern understanding of art ultimately depends upon the changing philosophical and scientific perception of the human and also of the soul.

Another approach influenced by Michel Foucault's history of the epistemes is provided by Andreas Mahler in his essay "The Materiality of Transparency" ("Die

7 "Philosophiegeschichte ziehen sie [Philosophen, Ärzte, Wissenschaftler und Gelehrte] die Konsequenzen aus einer für das 18. Jahrhundert insgesamt charakteristischen sensualistischen Wende, die von Locke über Berkeley bis zu Hume und anderen den ontologischen Realitätsbegriff in eine Summe kontingenter und nur im Subjekt zusammenhängender Impressionen auflöst. Daraus ergeben sich zwei Perspektiven. Man kann erstens von einem Prozeß der Transzendentalisierung der Beziehung zwischen Objektwelt und Anschauung sprechen, der letztlich auf das Kantische Philosophem von der Unerkennbarkeit der 'Dinge an sich' und der kategorialen Bedingtheit jeder Sinnesfähigkeit zustrebt. Das erkenntnistheoretische Problem, wie die zwei wesensverschiedenen Substanzen aufeinander einzuwirken vermögen, verschiebt sich dabei in einen erkenntnistheoretischen Hiatus. Zweitens folgt aus der Tatsache, daß die Objektverbürgung der Sinnesindrücke und damit ihr ontologischer Status unsicher wird, die Möglichkeit einer nicht mehr einholbaren Pluralität *individueller* Vorstellungswelten."