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Keats, Hegel, and Belated Mythography

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD played host to a broad array of projects for recasting literature as a form of thought and revising its relationship to such rival discourses as myth, philosophy, and science. Particularly in the texts surrounding German Idealism, projects boldly proposing the artistic creation of a “new mythology” coexisted with the resignation of Hegel’s aperçu that art is “of the past” (*Werke* 1: 32; *Aesthetics* 11). Faced with Rousseau’s complaint that the reflexivity of modern life entails the loss of the immediacy he identifies with “nature,” Kant announced as “das letzte Ziel der sittlichen Bestimmung der Menschengattung” (the final goal of the ethical vocation of the human race) that “vollkommene Kunst wieder Natur wird” (completed art should once again become nature) (95).¹ Following Kant’s cue, the theorists of German Idealism dreamt of restoring this lost nature within the work of culture. The fragmentary 1797 *System-Programm des deutschen Idealismus*—whose anonymous authors may have included the young Hölderlin and Hegel—thus envisioned the sensuous being reconciled with the rational in the form of a “neue Mythologie” (Hölderlin 2: 577).

At first glance, John Keats and the authors of the *System-Programm* seem at least temperamentally mismatched. Keats, who once famously wished for “a Life of Sensations, rather than of Thoughts” (Bate 238),² sometimes spoke as if he could do without reflection. Yet the ensuing image of Keats as a fashioner of beautiful objects for readerly consumption (see Levinson 34) should not obscure the subtly dialectical approach his late poetry takes toward its own status as an aesthetic object. Indeed, the interweaving of metaphor in *Hyperion* opens a perspective from which the creation of myth and its exposure as cultural fetish take place simultaneously before the reader’s eye.

By examining the relationship between the *System-Programm*’s search for new mythical forms and Keats’s self-consciously belated myth-writing, I hope to contribute to a growing body of criticism devoted to the paradox of Keats’s peculiarly political aestheticism. Some critics, such as Richard Cronin and William Keach, seek Keats’s implicit politics in the nuances of “Cockney poetry,” which Cronin

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

² On this wish Paul de Man famously remarks, “he had sense enough to speak of sensation as something one desires but cannot have” (238). In Idealist terms: to a thinking subject sensation only ever appears mediated by thought. See also Corcoran 327.

identifies as a “relationship between a style and a subject matter” that forthrightly announces Keats’s working-class identity at the same time that it lays claim to the cultural capital of classical subject matter and the epic tradition (787). For his part, Jacques Rancière discerns the political dimension of Keats’s poetry, not in its diction or syntax, but rather in the triple community the poetry weaves as elements within the poem, the poem’s relation to other poems, and human ties forged by poetic communication present distinct configurations of relationality (240). In short, Keats’s poetry “thinks politics even—or especially—in what one might call its aesthetics” (Rohrback and Sun 231).

The endeavor to read Keats’s politics from his poetic form becomes especially challenging in the case of *Hyperion*, a poem that represents revolution from the perspective of the losers. While for other writers of the romantic period (Shelley and Hölderlin, for example) the story of the Titans was beloved for its implications of recursion, Keats treats in his poem, not a prophesied resurrection of the older gods, but rather their overthrow and subsequent decay. Do the fallen Titans stand for the *ancien régime*, their short-lived Napoleonic successors, or a revolutionary proletariat whose time has not (yet) come? Since Alan Bewell and Teresa Kelley traced the provenance of the poem’s mythological figures to archaic art wrested from Napoleon’s Egyptian campaigns, historically minded readers have confronted the oblique and equivocal relation of the fallen Titans both to the recently vanquished Napoleon and to the English workers’ uprisings of the years to come. Also enigmatic is the poem’s dalliance with narratives of historical progress, particularly in programmatic statements on the part of the overthrown gods, in which Rei Terada detects the pathos of the vanquished “unconsciously in love with their conquerors” (290): “for on our heels a fresh perfection treads . . . the first in beauty shall be first in might” (2: 224–29). In response, some recent critics find aesthetic value not so much in victory as in the eye of the defeated. For Jonathan Mulrooney, *Hyperion* “presents historical trauma as constitutive of a new kind of aesthetic experience” (253), while Terada, who associates the Titans’ patient act of looking with Hegel’s “tarrying with the negative,” sees, if not quite a source of resistance to the dominant order, then at least a medium in which to reveal “the wholeness of the false” (276–91). In a more optimistic tone, Morris Dickstein has argued that “social renovation” in *Hyperion* is paradoxically rooted in “the disinterested exertions of art” (181).

In what follows, I argue that *Hyperion*’s figurations share the theoretical horizon of Keats’s contemporaries in post-Kantian philosophy and betray a concern with one of the formative impulses behind Hegel’s system-building: the interplay of myth and rationality. I locate Keats’s engagement with history in *Hyperion* precisely where he appears to suspend it: in those sculptural figurations of stasis in which Keats’s poem depicts, and to no small degree fetishizes, the archaic. By suspending history Keats is able to address how fetishization works, laying bare the motivations behind the presumption of autonomy in and beyond art. Because *Hyperion* is not only an attempt to write epic, but also an attempt to write myth, it is bound to confront the historicity of myth as a form of thought. In so doing, the poem exposes the fetishism latent in post-Enlightenment mythography.

The restoration of myth was clearly an enduring concern for Keats before he began to write *Hyperion* in 1819. That time when “holy were the haunted forest boughs,/ holy the air, the water and the fire,” as Keats called it in the “Ode to

Psyche" (38–39), was already an object of nostalgia for the poet of *Endymion*, desirous of a "flowery band to bind us to the earth," which he identified with mythical stories (*Endymion* 7). Yet insofar as the passage from myth to enlightenment involves the disentanglement of the subject from nature, Keats's later narrative poem pays ironic tribute both to this passage and to its inherent nostalgia. As an ironic myth of myth's demise, *Hyperion* reflects critically on the Idealist project of reconciling sensuousness and rationality, poetic and rational thinking (cf. Frye 136, 139–40).

According to a demystifying Enlightenment perspective on myth, mythical gods are connected to the earth in that they arose from it. Because they often take the form of sculpture in myth-making cultures, from the point of view of a later culture that no longer venerates the old gods but has inherited their figurations in artworks these gods freeze into immovable relics. The two registers of stone in *Hyperion* are hence the geological and the sculptural. If, as the poem intimates, "the Titans are fading into . . . the natural world from which they arose" (Taylor 674), in human memory they also fade into relics: lifeless statuary and archaic artifacts whose meaning has been lost. Early in the poem the narrator claims to translate the incomprehensible text of the gods into human terms: "some words she spake . . . some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue / Would come in these like accents (Oh, how frail / To that large utterance of the early gods!)" (1: 47–51). In the subsequent *Fall of Hyperion* it is Moneta, the speaker's divine guide, who performs this translation: "Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright, / I humanize my sayings to thine ear, / Making comparisons of earthly things" (2: 1–3). As if to correct an inconsistency in the narrative voice of his poem, in rewriting the *Hyperion* narrative Keats thus ensures that the poem's speaker no longer explicitly claims to mediate a more-than-human message.

A curious counterpart to this transposition from divine into human language appears early in *Hyperion*, when the old sea-god speaks for the first time and is said to struggle with the art of speech. Although the text of Oceanus's speech is perfectly articulate, the speaker both introduces and closes the speech by emphasizing Oceanus's "murmuring," as if here too he needed to translate the speech of the gods, this time not from a superhuman but subhuman idiom. It seems that the gods, hitherto identical with nature, first discover the need for eloquent discourse in their fall. Oceanus's murmuring is a subtle acknowledgement that there may never have been any other myth to tell besides that of the demise of myth.

After explaining to the speaker of *The Fall of Hyperion* the standard Renaissance account of allegorical narrative—the translation of godly things for human ears—Moneta mocks the mortal speaker's inability to read the text of nature: "Or thou might'st better listen to the wind, / Whose language is to thee a barren noise, / Though it blows legend-laden through the trees" (2: 4–5). This alleged plenitude of meaning in the natural world implies the presence of a living subject speaking from within nature, a subject that can only be mythical. When the wind blows in the earlier poem and the narrator deciphers it without the help of a Moneta or Mnemosyne, the reader does indeed hear a message therein—but one that acknowledges its own naturalistic interpretation: Coelus's admission that "I am but a voice" (1: 340). Furthermore, insofar as a voice is always someone's voice (the expression of a subject or "I"), the simple equation of "I" with "voice" paradoxically dismantles both. An "I" that is "but a voice" is no "I" at all, nor does it

possess a voice that is more than mere sound. This whisper of the wind in Keats's poem both breathes life into myth and exposes it as the evanescent vapor of a nostalgic romantic imagination.

Coelus's acknowledgement thus accompanies the equally resigned recognition that he has no influence on the world beyond the habitual cycles of nature: "I am but a voice; / My life is but the life of winds and tides, / No more than winds and tides can I avail" (1: 340–42). Similarly, Hyperion declines to attempt a sunrise out of step with the calendar, however much it might benefit his cause: "Fain would he have commanded, fain took throne, / And bid the day begin, if but for change. / He might not. No, though a primeval God, / The sacred seasons might not be disturbed" (290–93). Recognizing that he is the custodian of a natural cycle in itself "sacred," the sun god abdicates his mythical agency in favor of natural law. Oceanus names this new order of things, noting, "we fall by course of Nature's law, not force / Of thunder, or of Jove" (2: 181–82).

"Natural law" is one of the core concepts of Enlightenment and grounds a natural science that will banish spiritual power from nature. However, when "law" is explicitly thematized, politics are not far behind, and in Keats's poem the politics of divine abdication are equivocal. The political significance of the loss of godly power is less in what the gods represent—in an allegorical reading that lines up the poem's narrative of revolution to a corresponding sequence in European history—than in what that loss portends for the authority of a myth-making project that legitimates itself through the claim to translate a higher or originary language of divine power. Although Coelus emphasizes Hyperion's agency, his advice does not urge Hyperion to overcome a reluctance to alter the "sacred seasons." In response, Hyperion plunges into the sea behind his palace at sunset, an action that can be easily reconciled both to the narrative exigencies of myth and to the regularity of the diurnal cycle. As he is about to plunge into the water, Hyperion sees before him "the same bright, patient stars" he had seen when Coelus began to speak. Coelus's exhortation makes nothing happen.

Similarly, when Thea tells Saturn that "Thy thunder, conscious of the new command / rumbles reluctant o'er our fallen house; / And thy sharp lightning in unpracticed hands / Scorches and burns our most serene domain" (1: 60–63), the implicit message is less an assumption of authority by other gods than the suggestion that the elements have slipped free of the old gods' control and now rumble around without a master. In *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats revises his formulation from "conscious" to "captious at the new command" (1: 362), demythologizing the line further by declining to ascribe consciousness to nature. While it may not be correct to say that demythologization was the overall design behind Keats's revision of his earlier poem, a comparative glance at some of the two poems' parallels bears out the critical challenge that the question of myth poses to Keats's artistry.

Declaring allegiance to a disenchanting world in which their existence is superfluous, Keats's gods learn to speak in order to abolish themselves. In its depiction of a sunset over the sea, *Hyperion* narrates the natural process of a day through the vehicle of mythical figures whose fictionality it acknowledges (cf. Frye 158–62). Whether through his own ambition or the mediating figure of Moneta, in both poems the speaker sees himself confronted with the task of rendering legible the language of the gods; yet his rendering reveals that this

language has no content. Keats insists on writing myth while acknowledging that there is no myth left to write.³

This tension between mythopoetic ambition and historical awareness is most evident in the poem's evocation of its title character, the sun-god whom Brendan Corcoran aptly describes as "always about to fall" (326). The speaker describes Hyperion's flight through the eyes of a mythographer, transforming the sun into the god's vehicle and its flashing light into a set of symbolic figures:

The planet orb of fire, on which he rode
Each day from east to west the heavens through,
Spun round in sable curtaining of clouds;
Not therefore veiled quite, blindfold, and hid,
But ever and anon the glancing spheres,
Circles, and arcs, and broad-belting colure,
Glowed through, and wrought upon the muffling dark
Sweet-shaped lightnings from the nadir deep
Up to the zenith—hieroglyphics old
Which sages and keen-eyed astrologers
Then living on the earth with laboring thought
Won from the gaze of many centuries—
Now lost, save what we find on remnants huge
Of stone, or marble swart, their import gone,
Their wisdom long since fled. (1: 269–83)

The figures cast by the sun appear to this belated mythographer's eyes with their meaning already lost, and for illustration he can point only to the relics of lost cultic text engraved in stone. The speaker presents the figures cast by the sun as both natural phenomena and stone carvings, while omitting the creation of sacred meaning animating an originally myth-making culture. The poem refers to this intermediate stage elliptically, petrifying the whole life cycle of archaic myth-making culture into a simultaneous image. Thus, the figures cast by the sun on the sky appear as a single moment, however "many centuries" they took up in the "gaze" of "keen-eyed astrologers" (cf. Mulroney 259).⁴ Furthermore, when the gods' place of refuge comes into view in Book II, the gods themselves appear to be such relics: "Scarce images of life, one here, one there, / Lay vast and edgeways; like a dismal cirque / Of Druid stones upon a forlorn moor" (2: 33–35). In short, the gods resemble Stonehenge. Having lost their hold on the human imagination, they appear as artifacts. Here, Keats's poem recalls Walter Benjamin's description of

³ Referring to "the absence of a determinate beginning and end, which gives *Hyperion* the circular (nonlinear) shape of a myth-text" (312), Lilach Lachmann remarks that "Keats replaces the battle between the Olympians and the Titans with disconnected segments that re-present frozen historical moments, analogous to the Titans themselves" (310). This suggests that the specific circumstances in which Keats exposes the Titans—their painful dispossession by time and history—are nothing less than the appropriate form for the representation of the ahistorical world of myth as such.

⁴ The frozen time of such figures, a time in which history paradoxically becomes visible in an inert figure, bears an uncanny resemblance to critical characterizations of modern art in the German post-romantic tradition. Adorno describes art in terms strikingly similar to the speaker's description of the light-figures that *Hyperion's* sun casts: "Für ihr Rätsel fehlt der Schlüssel wie zu den Schriften mancher untergegangener Völker" (*Ästhetische* 193; "The key to art's enigma is missing, just as it has been lost for the writings of many peoples who have perished," *Aesthetics* 168). A modern artwork is an instantaneous relic, or as Keats's contemporary Jean Paul characterized his first novel, "eine geborne Ruine" (a born ruin) (13). Because Keats's poem petrifies an entire era of mythical thinking, it presents an ironic tribute to the rebirth of mythology evoked by the *System-Programm*.

baroque allegory as a discredited mythology that lives on as decoration, meaning something other than itself (*Origin* 226).

By anticipating central motifs of Benjamin's and Adorno's philosophical aesthetics, Keats's poem points toward that moment in the Hegelian tradition when art ceases to be subordinate to philosophy. Though the *System-Programm* envisioned poetic "mythology" and rational "philosophy" fusing into a new form of thought, for the older Hegel of the *Aesthetics* art and philosophy do not merge but form two ends of a teleological progression. Art, by which a culture seeks to grasp the absolute in the immediate apprehension of a sensory image (*unmittelbare Anschauung*), first yields to "religion": in Hegel's thought a conspicuously Protestant piety enabling the individual subject to internalize the divine absolute instead of capturing it in external images. Religion in turn gives way to conceptual thought (*Denken*), as the latter requires the unified thinking subject first granted by the god within (*Aesthetics* 1: 103–04; *Werke* 12: 148–52).

Looking back on this teleological progression of consciousness as something coming to completion in his own time, Hegel considers art "nach der Seite ihrer höchsten Bestimmung . . . ein Vergangenes" (in its highest vocation . . . a thing of the past) (*Werke* 12: 32) and claims that "Uns gilt die Kunst nicht mehr als die höchste Weise, in welcher die Wahrheit sich Existenz verschafft" (150; "For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself," *Aesthetics* 1: 103). For Hegel, "die Reflexionsbildung unseres heutigen Lebens" ("the development of reflection in our life today") entails a passage from art to philosophy as the privileged means by which a culture gives comprehensive form to the "absolute" (*Werke* 12: 31; *Aesthetics* 11), since art no longer stands on its own, but requires elucidation (*Aesthetics* 10–12, 31–32). As Hegel sees it, the project of writing a philosophical aesthetics such as his own is predicated on the supplanting of art by philosophy (cf. Schaeffer 152).

Hegel understands modernity as inescapable reflexivity. In Adorno's revision of Hegel, exchange relations and the commodity fetish take the place of reflexivity as defining conditions of modernity. Art can ignore these conditions only at the cost of becoming "false consciousness," bad art (*Aesthetics* 335–36; *Ästhetische* 368–69). According to Adorno, conceptual thought always overshoots its objects, creating a world of artificial, historically contingent categories not recognized as such, for concepts themselves are not exempt from the reified character of modern life. Thus faced with the ideological predicament Adorno ascribes to "instrumental reason," philosophy turns to artworks as enigmatic inscriptions of historical truth. In the structure of the artwork the philosophical eye can make out the "Physiognomik eines objektiven Geistes, der niemals im Augenblick seines Erscheinens sich durchsichtig ist" (*Ästhetische* 194; "physiognomy of an objective spirit that is never transparent to itself in the moment in which it appears," *Aesthetics* 128). As the "objective spirit" unfolds, not in the systematic dialectic of a work like Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but rather in the space between artistic and critical texts, belated and fragmentary acts of reading come to occupy the place of reflection.⁵

⁵ For a critical treatment linking Adornian "negative dialectic" with Keatsian "negative capability," see Kaufman, "Negatively Capable Dialectics." Kaufman views the difference between Keats and Shelley in terms of the Adornian problematic of "expression" and "construction," arguing that their palpably different approaches to poetry prefigure the twentieth-century debate between

What Adorno, here following Benjamin, calls the “truth content” of a work of art resides not in the artwork’s ostensible content but rather in the way its formal structure corresponds to contemporary social realities (see *Ästhetische* 193–97, 350–55; *Aesthetics* 127–30, 236–38). By ascribing social and, ultimately, political significance to artistic form—at times in opposition to a given work’s manifest content—Adorno re-envisioning the political dimension already evident in dialectical aesthetics before the development of Hegel’s mature system (see, esp., *Ästhetische* 381–82; *Aesthetics* 257). The political horizon of the 1797 *System-Programm* was utopian: “Die Philosophie muß mythologisch werden, um das Volk vernünftig, und die Mythologie muß philosophisch werden, um die Philosophen sinnlich zu machen” (Philosophy must become mythological, in order to make the people rational, and mythology must become philosophical, in order to make the philosophers sensuous), the anonymous text declares (Hölderlin 2: 577). This reconciliation of myth and reason implies a corresponding reconciliation in society, forging a common language for both the enlightened elite and the *moyen homme sensuel*. In what sense can romantic poetry claim to be this language?

Keats’s poem betrays its complex relationship to myth when it mimics, through its figural strategies, the language of a mythically inflected literature. In its Homeric origins, the epic simile relates human events to natural ones, thus subtly arguing that social realities are rooted in changeless nature. But in a text that feeds the suspicion that the gods are derived from nature, similes relating the gods to their natural background turn over on themselves in ways that skirt tautology. Thus, the epic simile characterizing how Saturn begins to speak both begins and ends with a roar in the pine forest that is its natural analogue:

There is a roaring in the bleak-grown pines
When Winter lifts his voice; there is a noise
Among immortals when a god gives sign,
With hushing finger, how he means to load
His tongue with the full weight of utterless thought,
With thunder, and with music, and with pomp.
Such noise is like the roar of bleak-grown pines,
Which, when it ceases in this mountained world,
No other sound succeeds. (2: 116–24)

The god’s thought is “utterless,” as inarticulate as the roar of wind in a pine forest. The thunder, music, and “pomp” that accompany his speech also lack discursive content and befit the ceremonious celebration of power: the god’s speech and the roar among the pines silence all other sounds. Yet what the poem describes is not the god’s speech but rather his anticipatory silence: “there is a noise . . . when a god gives sign / with hushing finger.” The admonition to silence is what brings forth “among immortals” the noise that must be their last. “Utterless thought” then gives way to the roar of the wind in the pines. By enclosing the gods’ inarticulate speech within its analogous natural sound, the poem implies that the gods’ speech—or rather non-speech—is nothing but that sound.

“avant-garde” and high modernist poetics, whose theoretical spokesmen are Benjamin and Adorno. Each of these poetic projects contains the material for a critique of the other, since each descends from Kant’s notion of aesthetic experience as “purposiveness without purpose,” and reflects on the aftermath of a failed revolution (372).

In lamenting his loss of power, Saturn reproduces another central characteristic of the mythical worldview—namely, the redoubling of the natural world into phenomena and their attendant deities. For myth-making peoples the sun is the natural body plus the god that guides it, while the sea is the body coterminous with its shores as well as its guardian, who can take human form elsewhere when necessary.⁶ When he finds himself deposed, Saturn exhorts Thea to find his “real self” fallen somewhere between his deserted seat of power and the place where he now lies, as if his “strong identity” were a material thing that could be sought after and located, as an aura or emanation that makes him a god (1: 114). Saturn can read his own whereabouts only in the face and speech of Thea, because in the world of myth the self is redoubled, externalized. Yet in naming this externalization, Keats implicitly leaves the world of myth and enters that of reflection.

This redoubling of the subject in myth ironically prefigures the redoubling of the subject in introspective self-consciousness. Just as Saturn only recognizes himself in Thea, so Apollo recognizes his condition through examining the face of Mnemosyne. The notion that Mnemosyne is a personification of Apollo’s memory may explain why they pursue a dialogue in which each prods the other to explain where Apollo came from and why. In other words, the dialogue between Apollo and Mnemosyne may be precisely what Saturn and Thea’s dialogue is not: a narrative portrait of introspection. Yet it is of decisive importance that this moment of interiority—unknown to the earlier generation of gods—is externalized in a narrative form continuous with that of myth.

Apollo’s realization of his incipient apotheosis follows Mnemosyne’s silence in response to his question asking whether there are other realms besides the earthly one he currently inhabits. Unwittingly, Apollo has already suggested that such a question is unnecessary by asking “why should I / Spurn the green turf as hateful to my feet?” (3: 93–94). This allusion to Milton’s Satan, who “spurns the ground” (2: 929) before his flight into Pandemonium, distinguishes Keats’s Apollo from his Miltonic precursor by highlighting Apollo’s tacit recognition that the earth is enough. While a more conventional mythical account of Apollo’s apotheosis might have him acquire wings at this point, the diction of the last two lines suggests that the god’s final pangs are not an addition, but a subtraction: “and lo! from all his limbs / Celestial . . .” (3: 135–36). In short, the poem’s last words on Apollo’s metamorphosis portray it as an experience of loss.⁷ This paradox of becoming godly by giving up godly things befits an ambivalent metamorphosis that the speaker describes first as death and then as its inverse:

⁶ To put it in more specifically literary terms, “myth is an art of implicit metaphorical identity. The word ‘sun-god,’ with a hyphen used instead of a predicate, is a . . . literal metaphor” (Frye 136). In Keats’s poem figuration foregrounds the *difference* between the natural body and the persona that together comprise the mythical god. The figure that does so is quite often simile (see below), which Frye sees as the key figure of “realism, or the art of verisimilitude” (136). Elsewhere, Frye characterizes “romanticism” as a belated or “sentimental” art of “romance,” which he sees as “intermediate” between myth and realism (35–36).

⁷ From a standpoint influenced by trauma theory, Brendan Corcoran also emphasizes the continuity of Apollo with Hyperion in a community of decline; Apollo’s “umbilical connection to the older dispensation of Hyperion is apparent . . . in the fact that *in the space of the poem* neither has Hyperion died nor has Apollo completely been born: both remain in a state of suspended promise and doom” (326). Both Apollo and Hyperion ultimately become specular figures in which the poet-speaker witnesses his own death and survives to tell the tale in “epitaphic” verse (339–40).

Most like the struggle at the gate of death,
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
 Die into life. (3: 126–30)

Does Apollo “die” by giving up his claim to an immortality that would be an alternative to, and hence an escape from, life? The passage both invites and deflects a paraphrase based on such binaries. The most that can be said with certainty is that in his moment of instruction Apollo parts ways with “pale immortal death”—that is, death seen as a mythical character.⁸ His moment of transformation is an experience that the allegorical machinery of myth can explain at best negatively.

Apollo's apotheosis thus takes place under the sign of a departure from supernatural themes. Mnemosyne tells Apollo that as the patron of poetry she “hath forsaken old and sacred thrones / For prophecies of thee, and for the sake / Of loveliness new born” (3: 77–79). When Apollo, who is apparently unfamiliar with the myths of the heavenly bodies, which have formed the content of the first two parts of the poem, asks “What are the stars?” Mnemosyne does not respond. Yet studying her face fills him with the power to invent such stories on his own (3: 110–13). Apollo, now a placeholder for the poet of *Hyperion*, becomes a mythographer, although his own story breaks off before he can take on a mythical mantle himself by assuming control of the sun. Apollo's instantaneous education in myth-making thus appears as the *telos* of a narrative that cannot go on once its content must become simply another myth.⁹

While the plot of the poem is explicitly the overthrow of a generation of gods and implicitly the overthrow of myth itself, the poem stakes its legitimacy—an issue with which Keats is passionately engaged in both *Hyperion* poems—on its ability to tell this story as a myth. Like the anonymous authors of the *System-Programm*, Keats has fashioned a “new mythology.” Yet whereas the German Idealist thinkers envision a new form of thought embodying the harmonious reconciliation of sensuousness and rationality, Keats instead projects poetry as the myth of myth's demise at the hands of Enlightenment reason.

In 1820 Hegel stylizes philosophy as “die Eule der Minerva” (“the owl of Minerva”) that “erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug [beginnt]” (“begins its flight only with the onset of dusk”) (*Elements* 23); in Keats's poem (written the previous year) one of the most concentrated images of the twilight of mythical thinking is an image of the outgoing sun god as figuratively a sunset. When *Hyperion*

⁸ To insist in this way on teasing out the paradox in conceptual terms—even in order to show where that attempt breaks down—means consciously to defer that kind of reading which tropes Apollo's anguish as an anxiety related to his author's poetic ambition. For the latter, see Sandy 214, Plasa 145, and Vassallo 218. In my view, the rhetoric of *Hyperion* betrays awareness that what the modern poet must relinquish is a mythical relationship to his language and materials—however mediated this relationship may be in Keats's case by the legacy of Miltonic epic with its ideals of poetic completeness.

⁹ For a somewhat more optimistic treatment of the dialectic of belated myth, see James Chandler's reading of the “Ode to Psyche” in *England in 1819* (408–25). The final stanza's “fane / in some untrodden region of my mind” set aside for devotion to the new goddess, Chandler implies, makes possible the longed-for integration of thought and sense: longed for, one might add, in German Idealism as well as English Romanticism. Yet Chandler is careful to note that this integration takes place only in the future tense (422–24).

lands on a granite outcropping overlooking the hiding place of the fallen gods, he appears at first in a light consonant with the natural sight of a sunset over such a rock formation.

It was Hyperion: a granite peak
 His bright feet touched . . .
 Golden his hair of short Numidian curl,
 Regal his shape majestic, a vast shade
 In midst of her own brightness, like the bulk
 Of Memnon's image at the set of sun
 To one who travels from the dusking east;
 Sighs, too, as mournful as that Memnon's harp,
 He uttered, while his hands contemplative
 He pressed together, and in silence stood. (2: 367–78)

Faced with the task of rendering a character from the redoubled world of myth, in which Hyperion is both the natural sun and the anthropomorphic god within it, the speaker reaches for a parallel phenomenon among the arcana left behind by those who worshipped such gods. “Memnon’s image” refers to an ancient Egyptian statue said to emit a sound when struck from behind by the rays of the setting sun. As a result, Hyperion appears as both the natural sun and a sculpture.¹⁰ The sun god’s human emotion comes across by recourse to an analogy of the alleged effect of the sunset striking the statue, an analogy that petrifies the god into a relic.

A comparison of Keats’s passage to the recurring appearance of the same Memnon statue in Hegel can illustrate how deftly Keats’s poem comes to inhabit both the mental space of mythopoesis and that of its critique. For the early Hegel of the *Phenomenology* the statue of Memnon both exemplifies and allegorically stands for a stage in the development of consciousness that he calls “die natürliche Religion” (natural religion). Unlike the artist of the subsequent “Kunstreligion” (religion of art), which Hegel will identify historically with classical Greece, the artificer of “natural religion” does not yet recognize his own craft as contributing to the essence of the work it brings into being; what makes a statue of Memnon, for example, an authentic vessel for the god does not reside in any spiritual insight on the part of the artist, who is merely following a prototype (*Werke* 2: 533; *Phenomenology* 410–01; see Pinkard 232–35). A few lines later Hegel refers to the *ka’aba* of Mecca as the typical object of worship in this stage: not a product of human artifice but an opaque rock that has fallen from the sky, a fetish (*Werke* 2: 534; *Phenomenology* 411).

While Hegel does not explicitly call on the notion of the fetish in his discussion of “natural religion,” the activity of the archaic Egyptian artificer forming a statue of the god is fetishistic in the sense Marx was later to give to that term, which entails a disavowal of the artificer’s labor as the source of the statue’s authenticity. In this sense all artifacts of “natural religion” appear allegorically in the image of the Memnon statue resonating when struck by the sun’s rays: just as Memnon owes his “voice” (or rather his sound) to solar intervention, so too does the artifact of “natural religion” owe its meaning—its claim to house the god—to a merely given sanctity that the human community has not yet come to identify with its own activity.

¹⁰ I read the chiaroscuro of “a vast shade / In midst of her own brightness,” not as a hint of Hyperion’s “self-displacing” (Plasa 125), but rather in light of the displacement in perspective that takes place between myth and enlightenment at the moment when the human figure within the sun becomes a statue.

Of course, the statue of Memnon is not just an allegory but also an artifact of “natural religion.” In the *Aesthetics* Hegel devotes another passage to the Memnon statues and their cult, this time making it more explicit that the statues are fetishes in the anthropological sense, containing the life of the god they represent: “Die Ägypter und Äthiopier verehrten den Memnon, den Sohn der Morgenröthe, und opferten ihm, wenn die Sonne ihre ersten Strahlen sendet, wodurch das Bildnis mit seiner Stimme die Anbetenden begrüßte” (*Werke* 13: 282; “The Egyptians and Ethiopians worshipped Memnon, the son of the dawn, and sacrificed to him when the sun sent forth its first rays, and in this way the image greeted the worshippers with its voice,” *Aesthetics* 2: 643). By evoking the Memnon motif to describe a mythical god landing on a mountaintop, Keats’s poem ironically turns an image of mythical agency into an image of the kind of fetishistic representation with which Enlightenment critique identifies mythical thinking.¹¹ As if to underline this reversal, Keats also replaces morning with evening in his depiction of Hyperion standing like Memnon’s statue at sunset.¹²

The natural body and the cultural artifact, the sun and the statue, are two poles within which the life of a mythical god runs its course; Keats’s metaphorical practice brings both simultaneously into view. Thea and Saturn, for example, resemble “natural sculpture in cathedral cavern” (1: 86). To the poem’s anthropocentric imagination, rock formations resemble sculptural figures, while their natural enclosure underground resembles not just any architectural space but specifically a cultic one. This is the result not of the anthropocentric imagination of myth but a belated one, which has already seen both the ascription of human form to natural objects and their transformation into works of artifice. Moreover, because “natural sculpture” compresses the creation and decay of myth into an instantaneous image, it betrays the “sonderbare Verschränkung” (curious compression) of “Natur und Geschichte” (nature and history) in which Benjamin sees the origin of baroque allegory (*Ursprung* 146; *Origin* 167). That the expression “cathedral cavern” has itself become a dead metaphor in the time since Keats wrote his poem lends added poignancy to Keats’s portrayal of the mythopoetic imagination hardening into monumental inertia.

“Nature” and “history” fuse not only in allegory but also in the nineteenth-century culture of monuments. Kant responds to Rousseau’s pessimistic narrative of culture as regression with the first programmatic statement of German Idealism: culture should become a “second nature” (95). It is only a short step from there to Marx’s critique of a bourgeois culture that seeks to pass off its own cultural norms of economic antagonism as the unchangeable dictates of nature. Reification, in which the mark of creative process vanishes from the artifacts of labor, reflects a general disappearance of the productive process of history from a world that appears to be merely given. Another face of the same process is the petrification of culture into monuments.

¹¹ Although no critic, to my knowledge, has explicitly compared Keats and Hegel on the Memnon figure, the problematic of artistic agency I am tracing here has at times been touched on in a more affirmative key. See, for example, Kelley 210–11, 221.

¹² The appearance of Hyperion figured as Memnon is an instance of what Lachmann, calling on Russian formalism, identifies as a Keatsian technique of “laying bare the device,” or an “exposure of artifice and self-reflexive mediacy” (308). What such figures “lay bare” is the fetishism implicit in a modern poetry that lays claim to myth as a mode of comprehending the world.

This recognition is bound to infect the notion of aesthetic autonomy. When in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education* Friedrich Schiller claims that aesthetic experience safeguards the autonomy of the aesthetic spectator, the proof of his claim is a Roman statue, a relic. Though the sculpture becomes important to Schiller in the moment of its contemplation by a spectator, he nevertheless insists that the artwork stands outside of all relations to both time and space:

In sich selbst ruhet und wohnt die ganze Gestalt, eine völlig geschlossene Schöpfung, und als wenn sie jenseits des Raumes wäre, ohne Nachgeben, ohne Widerstand; da ist keine Kraft, die mit Kräften kämpfte, keine Blöße, wo die Zeitlichkeit einbrechen könnte. Durch jenes unwiderstehlich ergriffen und angezogen, durch dieses in der Ferne gehalten, befinden wir uns zugleich in dem Zustand der höchsten Ruhe und der höchsten Bewegung, und es entsteht jene wunderbare Rührung, für welche der Verstand keinen Begriff und die Sprache keinen Namen hat. (*Werke* 2: 535–36)

The whole figure reposes and dwells in itself, a creation completely self-contained, and, as if existing beyond space, neither yielding nor resisting; here is no force to contend with force, no frailty where temporality might break in. Irresistibly moved and drawn by those former qualities, kept at a distance by these latter, we find ourselves at one and the same time in a state of utter repose and supreme agitation, and there results that wondrous stirring of the heart for which the mind has no concept nor speech any name. (*Essays* 132)

The sculpture is a “völlig geschlossene Schöpfung”—an alternative cosmos without either spatial or temporal relation to the human world. Schiller’s insistence on the self-completeness and a-temporal perfection of the sculpture amounts to a displacement of art into the realm of theology, a displacement strengthened by the insistence on paradox and the inexpressible in characterizing the aesthetic experience. The speaker ascribes to this experience the mutually contradictory predicates of “Ruhe” (calm) and “Bewegung” (motion), while his insistence that the aesthetic object irresistibly attracts its spectator while simultaneously holding him at a distance strongly resembles what Benjamin will later describe as the artwork’s “aura” (*Illuminationen* 142; *Selected* 3: 104–05), itself a remnant of the time when artworks were venerated as cult objects. Furthermore, because Schiller explicitly distinguishes neither the gods from their figurations in sculpture nor the cultic experience of an ancient Roman from the aesthetic experience of a modern spectator before an autonomous work of art, his argument for aesthetic autonomy unwittingly recreates a cultic sensibility.

While Schiller thus resurrects key aspects of the mentality of myth in his construction of an autonomous aesthetic, Keats’s depiction of the gods in *Hyperion* places important dimensions of the mythical gaze firmly in the past. Although *Hyperion* mostly appears in the poem as he would appear to a myth-making people—namely, as the redoubled unity of the sun plus its anthropomorphic god—there is one crucial difference: this god has petrified into a cultic statue. The same goes for the appearance of the gods as “natural sculpture in cathedral cavern”: they are citations of the world of myth rather than its reanimations. Keats’s poem thus affords its readers an experience of mythical thinking while simultaneously keeping in view myth’s obsolescence. Whereas the aesthetic idealism contemporary with Keats dreamt of recreating lost nature in the work of culture, in Keats’s poem myth rejoins nature in the form of historical artifact (cf. Sachs). In another passage in the *Letters*, Schiller appeals to “bedeutende Steinen” (“significant stone”) as envoys from a timeless world of form capable of capturing the noble content of the past and communicating it to future times:

Der Römer des ersten Jahrhunderts hatte längst schon die Knie vor seinen Kaisern gebeugt, als die Bildsäulen noch aufrecht standen, die Tempel blieben dem Auge heilig, als die Götter längst zum Gelächter dienten, und die Schandtaten des Nero und Commodus beschämte der edle Stil des Gebäudes, das seine Hülle dazu gab. Die Menschheit hat ihre Würde verloren, aber die Kunst hat sie gerettet und aufbewahrt in bedeutenden Steinen; die Wahrheit lebt in der Täuschung fort, und aus dem Nachbilde wird das Urbild wieder hergestellt werden. (*Werke* 2: 532)

The Roman of the first century had long been bowing the knee before his emperors when statues still portrayed him erect; temples continued to be sacred to the eye long after the gods had become objects of derision; and the infamous crimes of a Nero or a Commodus were put to shame by the noble style of a building whose frame lent them cover. Humanity has lost its dignity; but Art has rescued it and preserved it in significant stone. Truth lives on in the illusion of Art, and it is from this copy, or after-image, that the original image will once again be restored. (*Essays* 109)¹³

Emboldened by his reading of Kant's *Third Critique*, Schiller sees form as something the artist draws forth from "the absolute, unchanging unity of his being" (*Werke* 2: 532; *Essays* 108). Since form is timeless, it is capable of containing noble content, which is in itself transient, and communicating it to future ages. Statues remain noble even once the gods they represent have become risible. By a dialectical sleight-of-hand, the artifact has become the refuge of eternal values while its prototype awaits a new birth. In a formula reminiscent of Kant's suggestion that "nature" should come to life again within the "culture" that has displaced it, or the *System-Programm's* hope that "mythology" will be reborn through "philosophy," Schiller declares that "truth" is alive "in illusion."

Keats's poem presents the copy's paradoxical priority over the original in quite another sense. By bringing Hyperion, a sun god, into view through an analogy to an historical fetish-statue of a god worshipped at sunrise, the poem suggests that it can make visible the specifically mythic feature of the god—his being both solar body and anthropomorphic subject—only by analogy to a sculptural representation whose role in a system of magical thinking is well known. The poem envisions an "original" only by recourse to a "copy or after-image," which stands, not as a prototype for new creations, but as an aesthetic end in itself—or rather as a monument to its own obsolescence. Kant, Schiller, and the *System-Programm* all imagine a reconciliation of opposites leading to a new birth. In *Hyperion*, however, nature and culture, myth and reason, illusion and truth do not merge in the privileged medium of the artwork to heal the rifts left in European consciousness by Enlightenment critique. The poem stages instead the confrontation of these opposites in such a way as to highlight its own awareness of itself as an artifact.

In so doing *Hyperion* anticipates the historical materialist turn that Hegelian thought takes in Benjamin and Adorno. The enigmatic compression of time that occurs in many of Keats's metaphors, the figure of petrification, and the concern with fetishism reappear at significant moments in both of these later writers' aesthetic thought. In Benjamin, these motifs bring together texts as disparate as "On the Concept of History" and the *Trauerspiel* book. In the former, the historian's gaze crystallizes temporal process into an image, rendering visible the utopian tendency latent in any moment of historical time. Likewise, in the gaze of the baroque allegorist, the image of life crystallizes into an inert constellation.

¹³ The original German does not mention "the illusion of Art," but quite simply "illusion" or "deception" (*Täuschung*). The opposition between "copy" (*Nachbild*) and "original" or "prototype" (*Urbild*) is also more pronounced than in the English translation.

Although “allegory” proceeds in the register of mourning and Benjamin’s proposed historiography in that of hope, formally they are akin. Both are writing strategies meant to counter reification by adopting its structural logic: the transformation of life into inorganic matter. In the baroque, Benjamin tells us, language itself becomes a thing:

In den Anagrammen, den onomatopoeischen Wendungen und vielen Sprachkunststücken anderer Art stolziert das Wort, die Silbe und der Laut, emanzipiert von jeder hergebrachten Sinnverbindung, als Ding, das allegorisch ausgebeutet werden darf. (*Ursprung* 183)

In the anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and the many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects that can be allegorically exploited. (*Origin* 207)

This analysis prefigures in turn Adorno’s analysis of Benjamin’s philosophical language:

Philosophie eignet den Warenfetischismus sich selber zu: alles muß ihr zum Ding sich verzaubern, damit sie das Unwesen der Dinglichkeit entzaubere. So gesättigt ist dies Denken mit Kultur als seinem Naturgegenstand, daß es der Verdinglichung sich verschwört, anstatt ihr unentwegt zu widersprechen. (S.u.G 61)

Philosophy appropriates the fetishization of commodities for itself; everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things. So saturated is this thought with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it. (*Prisms* 233)

In these successive diagnoses of poetic modernity by Benjamin and Adorno, the motif of poetry striving to return to the inorganic is recurrent, a motif already present in Keats’s later poetry.¹⁴

Thus far I have traced a narrative of dialectical aesthetic thought from the *System-Programm* through the mature Hegel and on to the decisive turn made within this tradition by those twentieth-century Hegelians, Benjamin and Adorno. I have argued that grasping Keats’s placement on this timeline is essential to an understanding of how his poetry tacitly articulates a politically significant aesthetics—with *Hyperion* an especially appropriate focal point for this task. While this endeavor to place Keats in relation to the arc of German Idealism has also considered such pre-Hegelian dialecticians as Schiller, the focal point on this arc is necessarily Hegel. Although Hegel did not invent dialectical modes of considering the relation of art to thought, he brought history into the dialectic in a way that problematizes his contemporaries’ projects of fusing them, whether in “new

¹⁴ In eliding for the purposes of this essay the *conflict* between Benjamin and Adorno concerning the aura and, for that matter, the larger confrontation between a hermetic aesthetics of modernism, on the one hand, and the overtly political aesthetics of the avant-garde advocated by Benjamin, on the other, I draw support from Robert Kaufman, who has done more than any other critic to help us understand parallels between the second-generation romantics and the Frankfurt School. According to Kaufman, Adorno saw at work in Benjamin’s prose a residually auratic aesthetic that belies its author’s intention of consigning the “aura” to the past. In this view the “aura” of traditional art is present “negatively” or “spectrally” in the self-reifying nature of Benjamin’s prose. Kaufman here draws a conclusion that Benjamin himself did not draw from the pre-romantic writers from whom he seems to have learned this strategy of welcoming reification into his work. Benjamin’s discussion of the baroque in the *Trauerspiel* book implicitly presents that era as a precursor to montage and other avant-garde arts of aleatory recombination, which in Benjamin’s view shatter the aura and herald an overt politicization of aesthetics. However these aesthetic lines of descent may work out, it is clear that Keats’s writing shows affinities to both Benjaminian and Adornian notions, and differs markedly from that of Schiller, whose allegiance to art’s aura is unironic.

mythology” or in Schiller’s unwittingly auratic gaze. Keats’s figurations of myth, on the other hand, having absorbed the challenge of Hegel’s Enlightenment history, emerge within a modernity in which both myth and Enlightenment figure in a larger project of critique.

If Hegel’s is a world in which philosophy has supplanted art and can even declare art “a thing of the past,” it is also a world in which the plenitude of meaning sought in works of art comes into view only in retrospect, making artworks more articulate in their afterlives than in any present to which we can assign them. If “the mysteries of the Egyptians were mysteries to the Egyptians themselves,” then the most prescient artificer is one whose new hieroglyphics already position themselves as “hieroglyphics old,” pregnant with the same wonder with which we greet the misunderstood emissaries of an irretrievable past. Keats’s mythical figures, fashioned with the unsparing historical awareness that he might as well have learned from Hegel, carry within them their own critique and belong to the future.¹⁵

Adorno turns to the aesthetic to provide the contours for critical thought because he judges “philosophy” itself to have “missed” its “moment of actualization” (*Dialektik* 15; *Dialectics* 3). For the time being, what “actualization” philosophy can enjoy will come in and through art. Art and philosophy are both belated in a post-Enlightenment condition that is also the shadow of a failed revolution: something no less true for the romantics than for the Frankfurt School, as Robert Kaufman has pointed out (372). The other side of this belatedness, however, is the prospect that both art and philosophy are still too early and tasked with glimpsing in advance an actuality that has not yet found its notion. Aesthetic declarations of triumph are thus as tempting and suspect as those made on behalf of thought.

In the discourse of romanticism, triumphalism enters the aesthetic through claims to the latter’s autonomy, an ideology that came into its own in Anglophone New Criticism and remained entrenched within post-structuralism and other formalist approaches that proliferated in its aftermath. In its most extreme form, the view of an artwork as a self-contained globule of meaning independent of authorial intention verges on fetishism, in that the “spirit” of the work in no way derives from its architect’s design, but rather appears to live a life of its own. In Adorno’s language, this is to say that

Geist in den Kunstwerken ist kein Hinzutretendes, sondern von ihrer Struktur gesetzt. Das ist zu nicht geringem Grad für den Fetischcharakter der Kunstwerke verantwortlich: indem ihr Geist aus ihrer Beschaffenheit folgt, erscheint er notwendig als Ansichseiendes, und sie sind Kunstwerke nur, wofern er so erscheint. Dennoch sind sie, samt der Objektivität ihres Geistes, ein Gemachtes. Reflexion muss den Fetischcharakter ebenso begreifen, als Ausdruck ihrer Objektivität gleichsam sanktionieren, als kritisch auflösen. (*Ästhetische* 274)

Spirit in artworks is posited by their structure, it is not something added from outside. This is responsible in no small way for the fetish character of artworks: Because their spirit emerges from their constitution, spirit necessarily appears as something-in-itself, and they are artworks only insofar as spirit appears to be such. Nevertheless artworks are, along with the objectivity of their spirit, something made. Reflection must equally comprehend the fetish character, effectively sanction it as an expression of its objectivity, and critically dissolve it. (*Aesthetics* 183)

¹⁵ In this sense, Keats’s practice of belated myth amounts to an example of what Jerome McGann calls “imaginative skepticism”: “Romantic imaginations are restless and self-critical, constructing and reconstructing forms of life in order to examine and establish their limits, thence moving on to other, unrealized or undared possibilities” (656).

In advocating a hermeneutics critically aware of the “fetish character” of modern artworks as an intrinsic dimension of their historical existence, Adorno’s last text reflects implicitly on the debates over aesthetic autonomy and ideology that were to play a guiding role in literary criticism in the years following his death. From the perspective of Adorno’s dialectic, the claim of the romantic poem to embody a self-enclosed creation or “windowless monad” is not so much an instance of ideological mystification as a harbinger of the position of artworks generally in the post-Enlightenment era (*Aesthetics* 236; *Ästhetische* 350). By declining to comment on their surroundings or their author’s intentions, the well-wrought urns of romantic and post-romantic aestheticism tell the truth about life in a reified world.

No other romantic poet was as susceptible to the cult of the poem as fetish as John Keats (cf. Levinson 223). Yet Keats’s *Hyperion* reveals considerable critical self-awareness about the “fetish character” of a poetry whose surface ambition is to revive the world of myth buried beneath the “disenchanted world” of the Enlightenment. It is no accident that the poem’s boldest assertion of aesthetic triumphalism, Coelus’s announcement that henceforth “the first in beauty should be first in might,” coincides in tone with the delusion of Saturn, who in his moment of defeat promises “beautiful things made new, for the delight / Of the sky children” (2: 229; 1: 132–33). In trumpeting the triumph of beauty, the poem makes claims indistinguishable from those of its defeated gods. The eyes revealing the irretrievability of a mythical worldview are still those of myth.

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