‘ERKENNTNISTHEORETISCHE MASCHINEN’: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SUBLIME IN THE WORK OF RAOUl SCHROTT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a new mode in recent German poetry. Far from the poetry influenced by the recent re-emergence of ‘pop’ culture, or the ‘Alltagssprache’ and ‘simple Storys’ of much recent writing from the former GDR, a number of poets have concerned themselves with modern science, particularly quantum mechanics and optics. These are among some of the most significant young poets of recent years (Thomas Kling, Franz Josef Czernin, Barbara Köhler, Durs Grünbein, Raoul Schrott etc.), figuring something which might be dubbed a contemporary of the ‘poeta doctus’. This new discourse is interesting enough in itself, as poetry and science have, in the twentieth century at least, often been thought to be diametrically opposed. However, closer examination of this work, particularly that of Raoul Schrott (b. 1964), an ‘emerging’ and, paradoxically, already very distinguished writer, reveals that poetry and science can be understood as profoundly analogous; particularly in their use of metaphor. Fascinatingly, the contemporary discourse of science is set alongside classical (mythological) models in his work. They are both understood as finally hopeless projects to humanise the vast indifference of the universe: ‘ein anderes sich in die leere/sagen’. The poem as ‘epistemological machine’ is set to interrogate the places where those human maps, models and vocabularies fail. The real territory of Schrott’s work is thus revealed – in Hotels (1995), in essays, in four works of recent prose, and especially in Tropen (1998) – to be the boundaries of perception – sub limes – where the models of human understanding fall away and point beyond themselves to an experience of the ‘sublime’.

Among emerging writers in the German language the Austrian Raoul Schrott has a special status. Born in 1964, this academic, explorer, prodigious translator, poet and novelist, essayist and dramatist has been both widely acclaimed and criticised. Bibliographies list two major poetry collections, Hotels and Tropen, though there are many more in smaller specialist presses, a prize-winning novel, books of essays, poetological discussions with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, CDs, a film, a drama in verse, translations of poetry from various languages (including Breton, Irish, Welsh, Russian, French and English and some major names including Brodsky and Walcott), two commissioned stage versions of classical material for the Burgtheater (Backchen and Gilgamesh) which have since appeared within his own scholarly editions, a Novelle and two collaborations with the artist Arnold Mario Dall’O, including the ‘Brevier’: Das Geschlecht der Engel: der Himmel der Heiligen.1 Early on in his career he was hailed by

1 Some of the main primary texts are as follows: Raoul Schrott, Finis Terrae. Ein Nachlaß, Munich 1995; Hotels, Munich 1995; Die Erfindung der Poesie: Gedichte aus den ersten viertausend Jahren, Berlin 1997; Die Musen: Fragmente einer Sprache der Dichtung, Munich 1997; Fragmente einer Sprache der

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H. C. Artmann in terms which have become the norm of criticism: ‘was ich schätze an ihm – so jung er ist [. . .] er ist ein gelehrter Poet, ein poeta doctus’. The book which brought him to general attention, and cemented his reputation as erudite poet and scholar, was the anthology Die Erfindung der Poesie: Gedichte aus den ersten viertausend Jahren which included his commentaries and translations from various ancient languages including Greek, old Irish, Welsh and Arabic. His classical learning and his knowledge of languages certainly belong to the traditional territory of the ‘poeta doctus’ figure. However, this impression has also been underscored by his explicit interest in modern science that has brought him comparison with Gottfried Benn and Ezra Pound. It is true that his poetry has often engaged with the material of modern science and in interviews and essays Schrott has demonstrated his interest in the subject. This has largely determined his critical reception. Here, however, I would like to argue that his interests go further and are, in a sense, also less contemporary. For him science is a ‘doxa’, a vocabulary, even a model of thinking, but his real goal is something larger and more ancient: the contemplation of the sublime.

There has been a noticeable obsession with scientific discourse in recent writing. This is not a completely new phenomenon, but in the frequency and intensity with which it has appeared recently, it does seem to be something new. In many ways this is not surprising. As the editors of a recent British anthology of ‘101 poems about science’, A Quark for Mister Mark, point out, the sheer amount of science produced in the last 100 years, and the way it has affected life, has no precedent. In the modern age poetry and science have often been thought of as irreconcilable opposites. In its use of language, for example, poetry might be said to function quite differently from the sciences. Science has traditionally tried to strip language down to a single, logical, localised meaning; poetry, on the contrary, exploits as many possible meanings and interactions between words and thoughts as it can. Scientific papers set out to make statements that do

Dichtung: Grazer Vorlesungen zur Literatur, Graz/Vienna 1997; Tropen: Über das Erhabene, Munich 1998; Die Erde ist blau wie eine Orange. Polemisches, Poetisches, Privates, Munich 1999; Backchen, Munich 1999; Die Wieeste Lop Nor, Munich 2000; [with Arnold Mario Dall’O] Das Geschlecht der Engel: Der Himmel der Heiligen, Munich 2001, Gilgamesh. Epos, Munich 2001. After the first reference in a footnote page references to primary works and to Schrott’s essays and interviews will be given in the text.


3 Schrott’s work has not been free from hostile criticism that sees in him at best an over-ambitious amateur. See Leopold Federaira, ‘Der große Poesie-Schwindel. Über Raoul Schrotts Erfindungen’, Merkur, 6 (2001), 495–508.

4 See my ‘The “poeta doctus” and the new German poetry: Raoul Schrott’s Tropen’ in a special edition of The Germanic Review on contemporary German poetry, ed. Michael Eskin (forthcoming).


6 Maurice Riordon and Jon Turney (eds), A Quark for Mister Mark: 101 poems about science, London 2000, p. ix.
not represent an end in themselves, but seek outside verification from experiment; the truth of poetic statements is verifiable only from within the framework of the mood, style, and reference of the poem. As the Nobel Laureate, immunologist and poet Miroslav Holub comments:

The aim of scientific communication is to convey unequivocal information about one facet of a particular aspect of reality to the reader, and to the collective, anonymous thesaurus of scientific data. The aim of poetic communication is to introduce a related feeling or grasp of the one aspect of the human condition to the reader, or to the collective mind of cultural consciousness.7

However, if poetry and science appear to move in opposite directions, they do not necessarily move towards opposite ends, and with the recent widespread domestication of technology, it is almost inevitable that science should become a more integrated part of cultural expression.8 Writing about science might even be thought of as a necessary mark of one’s engagement in the present day: ‘eine Art Zeitgenosse zu sein’.9 It is striking how many distinguished poets have focused to some extent at least on scientific discourse in the 1990s: Franz Josef Czernin, Albert Ostermeier, Marcel Beyer, Thomas Kling, Ulrike Draesner, Raphael Urweider, Barbara Köhler, Brigitte Oleschinski, or Durs Grünbein, for example.10 In this way they might be seen to be participating in a renaissance of the figure of so-called ‘poeta doctus’. And Schrott (like Grünbein also, with whom he is often compared) has made this very much his territory.11 However, for Schrott (and this is what distinguishes him from some of the others mentioned) science is not merely a backdrop for the poem, nor a casual raid on an exotic range of vocabulary. Rather, his poetry claims an interest in science as a mode of apprehending and measuring the world:


However, it is both the fascination with the scientific paradigm but also its failure, finally, to grasp reality upon which his work turns.

A useful place to start is his collection *Tropen: Über das Erhabene* (1997). It contains poetry written over three years and investigates rhetorical tropes and geographical tropics as a way of approaching the sublime. A kind of Foreword and Epilogue, ‘Inventarium’ I and II respectively, offer reflections on the topic and many of the poems are accompanied by marginalia (‘Glossen’) on physical phenomena and rhetorical categories. The work consists of five ‘Stücke’, each of which contains poem sequences, some of which are spread through the different sections of the book: ‘Physikalische Optik’, ‘Dämmerungserscheinungen’, ‘Eine Geschichte der Berge’, ‘Eine Geschichte der Schrift’, ‘Die Erfindung des Alphabets’, and perhaps best-known: ‘Fallhöhen’, a gallery of portraits of famous scientists. The poems are almost all marked with a place name: e.g. Amstetten, Alexandria, St Helena, although a central point of sorts is Innsbruck. The collection also has a historical dimension, in that many of the poems assume voices from previous times or focus on historical events: Hannibal crossing the Alps, Galileo’s first glimpse through a telescope, etc. If the collection can be said to have a thesis, it posits a profound complementarity between science and poetry. But aside from some historical poems, the science represented in the collection is a very particular science. It is emphatically that of the Goodalls’ Third Science – ushered in by the Copenhagen statements of 1927 – where the apparent hierarchies and certainties of classical science have dissolved into the esoteric uncertainties of quantum mechanics and relativity.

In this model, quantum entities may be understood as waves and particles depending on the circumstances. This does not mean that they are waves or particles, but that we can build up a picture of how they behave by making analogies with things in the everyday world. Chance and indeterminacy are the fundamental characteristics of describable reality. More important, however, the observer is not merely involved in, but also creates, the world he perceives. Heisenberg’s famous statement on quantum uncertainty sums it up: ‘Even in science the object of the search is no longer nature itself, but man’s investigation of nature’. Much of Schrott’s work can be interpreted as exploring precisely these questions of perspective. In that sense, the scientist who is most important for this collection is Niels Bohr. Unlike Einstein, who insisted on the existence of an absolute reality to which we simply did not yet have access, Bohr operated with the notion of complementarity, probability, and perspective. Reality depends on, is indeed created by, one’s point of observation – but also one’s point of articulation: “Es wäre falsch zu denken”, sagte Niels Bohr, “daß die

12 Quoted in Greenlaw, ‘Unstable Regions’, p. 221.
Science and poetry then meet (rather than separate) in language. They share an economy based on perception and articulation, whether in the form of conceit or hypothesis, metaphor or proof. Moreover, physics needs poetic language. Indeed, it borrows regularly from metaphorical language; ‘red dwarf’, ‘black hole’, ‘charm’, the term ‘quark’ itself, taken from Joyce, all these rely on a discourse quite other to science. Beyond the limitations of science lies nature in all its vast indifference. It does not succumb (or at least not readily) to human inventions or perspectives. Schrott’s tropics/tropes aim to navigate precisely that realm which resists language. His concerns in this work are supported and extrapolated in his ‘Grazer Poetikvorlesungen’, originally published by Droschl, and more recently reprinted by DTV: *Die Erde is blau wie eine Orange* (1999), and in particular in a section of three lectures entitled ‘Poesie und Physis’. Here, and in various interviews, Schrott argues that, despite any apparent antagonism between poetry and science, they share affinities of motive, process and preoccupation. They are in essence ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’. To quote the English poet Lavinia Greenlaw:

There is a relation between poetry and science. It is shaped by culture and history, by affinities of subject and motivation, and the influence of paradigm and epistemology on perception and response. Inspiration, discovery and connection are integral to both disciplines. As are tedious hours spent learning a craft and practising technique.\(^{14}\)

Not so long ago such a connection was considered fundamental. Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* was written in poetic form, for example; for Dante the two were indivisible. Schrott himself cites a genealogy of such works (‘Tropen, Taucherhelm’, 62); and in the twentieth century one might add Ernesto Cardenal, Ezra Pound, Miroslav Holub and Primo Levi. Nevertheless he argues that the fundamental split came in the seventeenth century, at the moment that Galileo looked through his telescope and the universe ceased to be directly accessible to the senses. What Schrott instead argues for might be summed up in a single word: analogy. Niels Bohr is his witness:

Wir müssen uns klar darüber sein, daß die Sprache in der Quantentheorie nur ähnlich gebraucht werden kann wie in der Dichtung, in der es ja auch nicht darum geht, Sachverhalte im Sinne der klassischen Physik präzise darzustellen, sondern Bilder im Bewusstsein des Hörsers zu erzeugen und gedankliche Verbindungen herzustellen. (‘Tropen, Taucherhelm’, 59)

Poetry can be used to express scientific ideas in a manner which takes them beyond the narrow realm of scientific discourse and anchors them

within the broader cultural and historical context. This is a process bound up with the limits and variables of perception. Scientists and artists alike draw on analogies with the familiar to make the unfamiliar comprehensible. The key is in metaphor – the analogical thinking which is the most elementary kind of giving meaning that we know. It is worth quoting at length from an essay by Schrott:

Dabei ist das Gedicht die präziseste erkenntnistheoretische Maschine, die es überhaupt gibt. Wenn man sich die Erklärungen oder Parabeln ansieht, die die Naturwissenschaften aufstellen, von Schrödingers Katze bis zur Erklärung der schwarzen Löcher, so ist das Mythos oder Metapher pur. Die Geschichte von der schwarzen Katze in der schwarzen Box bei Schrödingers Quantentheorie ist ein Gedicht.

Ein Gedicht funktioniert aber nur . . . wenn man das Gegenüber aufrecht erhalten kann, diese Spannung von Subekt und Objekt in all ihrem Widerspruch. Das Hin und Her, das Ozillieren ist die Bewegung des Gedichts, es ist wie ein kleiner Quarz in der Uhr: wenn man ihn zusammenpreßt, gibt er ein Funken von sich, und das sind die Funken, die die Metaphern liefern. 15

This is a very striking piece of writing: a highly metaphorical description of the workings of metaphor. In that moment of epiphany generated by a metaphor comes a whole new way of seeing and saying. It is in this sense that Schrödinger’s cat might be understood as a poem. Firstly, in its oscillating uncertainty (the cat is neither alive nor dead but both simultaneously); but also in that it involves the perspective of an outside individual (the cat only needs to be considered to be alive or dead when someone looks into the box). 16 However, the integrity of the different terms of the metaphor also remains intact. One does not resolve the other. Instead the poem itself is a kind of open epistemological experiment.

The Greek ‘optike’ means ‘to see clearly’ and it is this kind of seeing with all its limitations and ambiguities that the collection interrogates. Two sequences focus explicitly on the mechanics of perception: ‘Physikalische Optik’ on ways of seeing, and ‘Dämmerungserscheinungen’ on natural phenomena. In ‘Physikalische Optik IV’ (Tropen, p. 21), for example, the poet takes as his cue the pale light which spreads on the Western horizon at sundown and the green or turquoise flash that can sometimes be seen between that and the blue above. ‘Physikalische Optik V’ (p. 23) follows on directly from that and observes the Eastern horizon. The marginal note facing the poem documents the effect (p. 22):

16 Compare the diagrams illustrating Schrödinger’s famous experiment in Schrott, Die Erde ist blau wie eine Orange p. 56, and p. 65, and further diagrams which parallel (more controversially) the workings of metaphor with another of his experiments, p. 69.

Spiegelbildlich dazu bildet sich kurz vor Sonnenuntergang am östlichen Horizont ein flaches, dunkelblaues Band unter dem hellen und roten Bogen der Gegenämmerung; die Grenze zwischen beiden verwischt sich, je höher es steigt. Dieses Band ist dabei nichts anderes als der Schatten, den die Erde auf die Atmosphäre wirft.

The poem then explores the experience.

[d...]
die langsam aus dem blick wächst je weiter alles

ins rutschen kommt · es ist als säch man die erde
in der drehung feuerfanning und in ihrem blaken in die nacht
auch den umriß eines armes einer hand – eos

Fascinatingly, in his Graz lectures, Schrott has provided a number of drafts and versions of this poem which demonstrate the thinking processes which brought it into being (Die Erde is blau wie eine Orange, pp. 160–5). But it is perhaps most interesting to see what has happened, as it were, between the note and the text. It would be an easy misunderstanding to see the notes as primarily ‘didactic’ in function. Schrott has often claimed that they are the result of research, born out of his curiosity about the world he lives in (‘Tropen, Taucherhelm’, 59). Their inclusion is a democratic gesture of sorts, providing information, which allows the reader access to the lexis of the poem. But the notes do not tell the reader what the poem is ‘about’, offer an interpretation, nor yet primarily serve to point up the specialist scientific understanding underpinning the poem. Poem and note move in quite different directions. Here it is useful to remember Schrott’s comments on the momentary relation between parts of a metaphor. Something similar happens here perhaps: the notes, often apparently tangential to the poem they preface, interact with the poem at some point which is peripheral to the poem itself, so that each illuminates the other.

The poem is moving. And the poignancy of the idea that we can see the shadow cast by earth itself is increased, not lessened, by learning about the mechanics of the effect. But the poem goes further by commenting on its own poetic processes and showing how the modern model of understanding has replaced earlier mythological ones.

der mythos ist genau noch als die metrie von sphären
die mit ihren trajektorien den untergang
der erde zeichnet · ein sich anders in die leere

sagen · vergleiche die sich unmerklich zur figur
verschieben · von anfang abgelenkt streut das licht
bis es zu bildern bricht – den hologrammen einer ohnmacht

Eos, the figure of dawn, the celestial spheres, and a contemporary under-
standing of colour and light rub shoulders in a single poem. The effect is to show that they are all models with which human beings have sought to comprehend the universe and render it amenable to human thinking. In the last strophe, the poem charts the processes by which such models become poetic figures: ‘vergleiche die sich unmerklich zur figur/verschieben’. But despite the reticence of the final line (probably the weakest line in the poem), the text itself has made visible a mind working against such indifference and impotence.

It is worth looking at the poem ‘Dämmerungserscheinungen II’ in some detail (Tropen, p. 101).

The prefatory note to this poem explains the optical phenomenon visible at about five o’clock as the earth shadow rises. This is a good example of a poem moving a long way from the original territory of the note – for this is a love poem of sorts. At the centre of the poem is the moment when the two territories or modes of apprehension are brought alongside one another. A metaphorical connection is made, and a sliver of sky can become a wing and then a segment of orange: ‘La terre est bleue comme une orange’ (Éluard). Colour is important, as elsewhere in Schrott’s work. Though here it is the careful use of shapes that works most powerfully on the reader. The segment of sky is linked by implication to the orange being eaten in the final line, the curve of the hill, the forehead resting in the hands, and perhaps the momentary glimpse of flesh as the shirt is pulled up onto the woman’s shoulder. As in many poems in the collection,
wings are evoked; these are often linked with birds or angels. Here it is the wing of earth-light, a light which takes on an extraordinary resonance in the poem; the placing of it and the pauses around it signal its importance. What is at issue here, however, is perception. Part of the power of the poem lies in the erotic intensity of the lovers’ companionship. This is extended into a kind of poignant voyeurism – we see something (as with the earth shadow in the previous poem) which we might never have thought to see. But a further stage comes in naming it. If anything this poem demonstrates the workings and the problems of metaphor. Faced with something extraordinary, language is finally inadequate, and yet it is the only tool the poet has. It might approach experience, in various images and metaphors, but in that approximation it always falls short. This is where the language of the sacred or metaphysical comes in. But what is interesting here is the way the vast awareness of the universe is set against the insignificance and intimacy of the lovers. The pause on ‘erdlicht’; the way it rises as a kind of pivot and declaration; the implacability suggested in the word order of the final four lines; the power of what seems to be the impossibility of contact, ‘und nichts mehr nun das sich berühren ließe’: all these work to suggest the fragile quality of human interaction. But through the linking of shapes and colours the gesture of humanity gains an extraordinary dignity, which is quickened by its fragility. The perception of the sublime is rendered in human terms, and in a language of humanity measuring itself against the beyond: ‘ein sich anders in die leere/sagen’ (p. 23).

Something similar happens in a number of the scientist poems from the ‘Fallhöhen’ sequence, which focus on moments of discovery by Newton, Galileo, Einstein and Bohr. A memorable poem, ‘Galileo Galilei – Avviso Astronomico’ (Tropen, pp. 145–7), captures the moment a cynical, and eminently worldly, Galileo first looks through his recycled perspicillum and finds the heavens suddenly filled.

ich richtete meinen apparat aufs firmament:
es war winter in padua und der himmel klar

und dann auf einmal nicht mehr – ein büschel trauben
war die milchstraße so hell daß man die kerne
in dieser kälte keimen sah und zirkumpolar

füllte sich dieses leere als ränne most aus allen dauben
eines vollen fasses . . .

Moving here is both his incredulity at the vastness, and awe at being the first man to witness what he has seen, but also the attempt to bring the universe into a human scale: later, on seeing Jupiter’s moons, he makes the comparison with customers chasing a pub landlord. This is clumsy, but precisely therein lies the poignancy – allowing the moments when the human spirit is overwhelmed to stand out even further:

tief hab ich in die nacht geschaut wie in ein glas wein
und in den myriaden hat sich mein blick verirrt
bis ich gegen morgen auf dem mond die erde
aufgehen sah.

Galileo will sell his telescope to the Doge of Venice so that he can keep ‘a better eye’ on his enemies, but the moment of meeting with that which exceeds the human capacity to fathom it remains as a resonant centre-point to the poem. I would like to look briefly at another poem which takes up a lens, another Newton poem: ‘Isaac Newton – Opticks’ (Tropen, p. 155). The note draws attention to Newton’s understanding of colour, and, in particular, light, which he believed to be made up of tiny corpuscles, but also to ‘move like an eel’ – a duality which anticipates the particle-wave theories of quantum mechanics. The poem begins with a low-key experimental scene: Newton cuts a hole in the window shutter, holds a prism to it, and watches the light reflected on the opposite wall. The white light is suddenly fractured into an overwhelming experience of colour:

dann splitterte die mauer wie ein regal voll
substanzen für den tag und seine alchemistereyen:

papier pottasche rotes blei und orpiment
indische beize quecksilber schwefelkupfer und gras
blaue blumen veilchen und wasserbläschen in allen farben

die blaue tinktur von spanischem holz die barben
von einem drachenfisch etwas auripigment
maulbeersaft und pfauenfedern – ich fand dafür kein maß

The lyric subject is left bewildered: ‘ich fand dafür kein maß/denn alles blieb ungreifbar’. Similes or metaphors offer ways of getting closer to understanding – ‘gleich den tönen einer skala: rot orange gelblich/grün blau indigo and violett’ – but finally they are approximations, attempts to render the overwhelming nature of the universe comprehensible and sayable. The end of the poem is interesting. It returns to the order of science, and the way traditionally perceived intervals of the spectrum combine ‘um sich dem auge zu beugen’. The emphasis on perception is there again, and a taxonomy which will give order to things. Significantly, the image seems to invest the figure of the scientist with some of the authority also intimated in the first line of the poem (‘ich habe mir die sonne in meine kammer mitgenommen’). But at the same time this is rendered fragile. For this apparent resolution cannot contain or cancel the metaphorical panoply of the previous strophes. The attempt to contain the colours in his imagination, to come close to them, has led the lyric subject into a tumbling list of exoticism, and the poem into a rich sound texture which resonates long after. The point of course is that nature does not bend itself to the eye of the observer, or rather the only place it does is in
language. Each of these poems then represents the scientist as poet/seer coming up against the boundaries of perception and an experience of the sublime, the beyond, which exceeds human taxonomy or scale.

The subtitle of Schrott’s collection, ‘Über das Erhabene’, is to be taken seriously. In many ways the collection could be seen as a series of ‘perspectives’ on contemporary and historical notions of the sublime. Indeed, in the Foreword and Epilogue to Tropen, the poet goes back to Longinus, Burke, Baumgarten, and Kant, in order to give a kind of aesthetic history of the sublime. This aspect of the collection, however, would seem, at first glance at least, to be at odds with the discourse of quantum physics. The sublime, after all, relies on notions of excess and ‘Rausch’, moving beyond what can be measured and defined and partakes of an affective rhetoric.

If science is increasingly present in modern work, the notion of the Kantian sublime object might seem very remote from contemporary concerns. Indeed the literary production of the past decades with its inclination for the partial and for minimalist forms might seem to offer little room for the un-ironic expression of gestures we normally associate with the Classical sublime. At most it seems that the sublime might survive as a critical category of the post modern: as an avant-garde ‘aesthetic’, for example, or perhaps as a stylistic register. The search for a kind of ‘post-modern sublime’ has indeed been evident in recent works, particularly from the USA, which regard reality as something mediated today by science and technologies.\(^\text{17}\) The difficulty is that the sublime is an essentially relational category, focusing on the relationship – or lack of relationship – of the human subject to the world it inhabits. As such it becomes a matter of perspective. But that relativity need not be presented in a mood of Romantic transcendence, rather it can be thought to be located between discrete orders of meaning, and thus to define precisely what cannot be categorised. As Tabbi points out: ‘the powerfully significant failure to signify has always characterised the rhetoric of the sublime’.\(^\text{18}\) This sketch is of necessity very superficial. But the interest, as I hope has become clear, is not so much in the detail, fascinating though this is, but in the structural similarity. The place where science and the sublime meet is then in the business of perception and in the business of language: therefore in the work of the poet.

Das Erhabene ist so letztlich Ausdruck einer existenziellen Haltung, die immer wieder an der Unantastbarkeit der Natur scheitert, eine Haltung, die sich gerade an diesem unüberwindlichen Bruch orientiert – das wäre die knappste denkbare Annäherung. Und sie gilt zugleich auch für das Gedicht, das die Topographie des Erhabenen mit dem Raster seiner Tropen entwirft. (Tropen, p. 8)


\(^\text{18}\) Tabbi, p. 13.
The confrontation with the sublime provokes terror and awe; the poem navigates that territory and attempts to articulate the confrontation – to humanise it: ‘Die Metapher ist ein verkürzter Mythos. Die Funktion des Mythos ebenso wie der Metapher ist, die Welt auf menschliche Proportionen zu reduzieren’ (‘Die Mitte zurückgewinnen’, p. 148). This is an act of humanisation; not one which finally reduces the grandeur or ambiguity, but one which makes it sayable. ‘If you free yourself of the human scale,/there is only futility’ (Lavinia Greenlaw, ‘The Cost of Getting Lost in Space’).19 Schrott seeks out the vastness of the natural world to confront there the terror and awe of that which is beyond the human scale. His poems then offer a kind of resistance to the futility by rendering the experience in language. The obvious conclusion, then, is that while the particular lexis of the poem, whether it is that of the new science, classical myth, linguistics, or optical perspective, forms the inevitable doxa of a poem, it is the poetic language of his texts – the finely poised rhythms, rich densities of sound, the metaphors, in particular – which forms the response.

My point can be made in another way. In the first two sections of the Tropen collection, the poems take their cue from mountains, landscapes, and the effects of light and weather which Kant and Heidegger counted among the significant manifestations of the sublime. However, as Schrott concludes laconically in his epilogue: ‘Aber die Höhe eines Mont Blanc ruft heute kaum mehr diese Ehrfurcht hevor, und auch auf den Parnass führt eine Seilbahn’ (Tropen, p. 211). One has to go further to discover the ‘Grenzbegriffe der Natur’ (ibid.), places where the human maps and vocabularies fail. Schrott’s works can be read precisely as expeditions of this kind. It is significant in this respect, however, that his more recent works have turned to different metaphors and different vocabularies to explore very similar structures; and I want to conclude by looking briefly at three works published since the Tropen collection. For while they concern themselves with taxonomies of human knowledge in the broadest sense, they cannot be said to deal with science. They are, however, united in a trajectory that takes them beyond those systems: beyond the ends of the known world in different literal and metaphorical senses.20

Schrott’s essay ‘Die Namen der Wüste’ (1999) is at one level a fascinating account of a real expedition to the Libyan Sahara. Its power stems from the contrast between the vast indifference of the landscape and the attempts of successive human civilisations to leave traces of their existence: from the drawings on ancient slabs of rock, to the arrowheads from 5000 BC scattered in the sand, or the buried amphora marking out ancient

19 This poem is included in Greenlaw’s first collection Night Photograph, London 1993, pp. 34–5.
20 His first novel Finis Terrae (1995), for example, presents the recovered manuscript of the Greek astronomer Pytheas of Massalia’s ‘logbook’ of a journey to reach and travel beyond the ends of the known world. This is inter-cut with a modern narrative of the Austrian archaeologist and explorer Ludwig von Höhnel in his own odyssey and metaphorical journey towards death.

trade routes. This essay is haunting in its imagery, but also gives an insight into Schrott’s concerns: in particular the way ancient civilisations, and their languages, leave marks which are always in danger of being swept away by the movement of waters, wind and sand, or becoming lost to memory like so many hieroglyphics. The Greeks gave the name ‘eremos’ to the desert, explains Schrott, a word derived from a verb ‘eiro’ meaning to link or tie (seira is a thread) But ‘eiro’ has a second meaning, in which the idea of a chain of words also appears, that is ‘I speak, I ask’. Here one is not very far from the idea of the subject’s attempts to assert himself in the emptiness, the Biblical ‘Rufen in der Wüste’, but also making connections, making tracks. ‘Und das Bedürfnis, in ihrer ununterbrochenen Stille den Laut der Stimme zu hören, um sich der eigenen Gegenwart zu versichern, das Verlangen darüber hinaus ein Zeichen von sich zu setzen’.21 The figure projected here reminds one involuntarily of the bitter end of one of Heine’s ‘Nordsee’ cycle from his collection Buch der Lieder.22 The poem, which has the suggestive title ‘Fragen’, portrays a ‘Jüngling-Mann’ standing on the edge of a stormy sea, ‘die Brust voll Wehmut, das Haupt voll Zweifel’, calling his questions into the night.

Sagt mir, was bedeutet der Mensch?
Woher ist er gekommen? Wo geht er hin?
Wer wohnt dort oben auf den goldenen Sternen?

The youth is certainly ironised, along with the ‘Häupter in Hieroglyphenmützen’ who have themselves contemplated similar puzzles over the centuries, in a way characteristic of Heine at this time. But the poem seems also to take the gesture seriously especially when it pans out to the sea-scape:

Es murmeln die Wogen ihr ewges Gemurmel,
Es wehet der Wind, es fliehen die Wolken,
Es blinken die Sterne, gleichgültig und kalt,
Und ein Narr wartet auf Antwort.

My point is not of course that Schrott bears many similarities with Heine, though he is certainly more ironic than many appear to give him credit for. It is rather the gesture which interests me – the Romantic longing for the sublime (and one might compare any number of paintings by Caspar David Friedrich) which is nevertheless tempered by the painful and very modern awareness of its futility. There will be no answer to the questions, however far one projects one’s longing into the beyond. A very similar constellation comes to mind in Schrott’s subsequent Novelle, Die Wüste Lop Nor (Munich 2000), which deals with desert material, but marries the excursions of an explorer, Raoul Louper, in search of singing dunes from Japan to the U.S., with a metaphysical journey towards an understanding of himself. In the course of his journey he leaves behind three shadowy

21 Quotations from manuscript. A version of ‘Die Namen der Wüste’ appeared in SZ, 28 December 2000.
lovers who merge to become a kind of eternal feminine, almost as mysterious to Louper as the elusive song of the sand, but each leaving their mark in the form of stories, a memento and a longing for a love half glimpsed but never secured: ‘Die Frau, die er einmal lieben wird, hat grüne Augen und rotes Haar’ (p. 11). Raoul is left alone contemplating the vastness: ‘Es heißt, daß singende Dünen auch auf anderen Planeten beobachtbar sein müßten, überall dort, wo es Wüste gibt und Wind, auf dem Mars etwa oder Venus’ (Die Wüste Lop Nor, p. 124). Here the questioner looking out to the desert or sea looks once again upon the vastness of space.

But places also exist beyond the reach of literal maps. Schrott’s Das Geschlecht der Engel: der Himmel der Heiligen, a series of letters to an undefined ‘Du’-figure, charts a kind of map of the imagination: the hierarchies of angels. A scholarly history of understandings of the angelic orders and the function of the angels is mixed with a sustained attempt to make contact with an ‘Other’ who never replies: ‘ich schieße Pfeile in die Nacht, ich schieße nichts als Pfeile in die Nacht’ (Das Geschlecht der Engel, p. 38). Although sensual, and a recognisable presence in the letters, the angel-Du also becomes a metaphor: ‘Ein Engel ist nichts als die personifizierte Bedeutung der Fragen die wir stellen’ (ibid., p. 117), or ‘Im Dunkeln sammelt Gold das Licht gegen die Nacht. Worte nichts als Worte, siehst du; die Notwendigkeit der Engel besteht darin, ein Gleichnis zu sein, für etwas, das sich nicht zeigt, das Licht, das sich nicht benennen läßt [. . .]’ (ibid., p. 121).

The danger of this kind of writing of course is that it becomes abstract, or second-hand, that the scholarship, the material or doxa might outweigh the writing. A second danger is that the language becomes the product of brief forays into a subject seductively rich in images, metaphors and phrases. Any poet knows the danger of using words which carry their own large resonance. But there is also the risk that this vast and powerful backdrop becomes simply that: a backdrop against which the perceiving subject sees only himself asking his ‘questions’. For the most part Schrott avoids these dangers (though the posturing of Heine’s questioning youth is a risk implied by the very project). Instead Schrott’s writing remains engaged with the sensual and concrete. One might compare the end of ‘Stargazing’, a very fine poem by Glyn Maxwell, a poet in English who bears comparison in a number of respects with Schrott. A couple peer up at the clear night sky – heads spinning with the infinitude of stars:

> After the wave of pain, you will turn to her
> and in an instant, change the universe
> to a sky you were glad you came outside to see.

> This is the act of all descended gods
> of every age and creed: to weary of all
> that never ends, to take a human hand,
> and go back into the house.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25}Glyn Maxwell, ‘Stargazing’, Rest for the Wicked, Newcastle upon Tyne 1995, p. 29.

For Schrott too the honesty of the undertaking is guaranteed by the sheer poetic delight in the play of electrons, the stories told in the stars, the sound of wind in grains of sand, the names given to desert phenomena in ancient languages, and – increasingly – the lover’s body. It is the sensual reality of Schrott’s work which finally persuades and it is hard not to concur with Hans Jürgen Balmes: ‘Als Lyriker ist Schrott kein Analytiker, er ist ein Erotiker’. This is perhaps not quite true; but it certainly suggests a useful frame of reference for approaching his work. The questions are a gesture of intimacy; an attempt to get closer, but one that – structurally – must remain unrequited. It is highly unusual to find a writer in the contemporary German scene so committed to his craft, and to the largest, apparently unironic questions, but without losing sight of a contemporary spirit or a concrete reality. As Schrott himself comments: ‘Originalität ist eine Erfindung der Neuzeit; die Poesie aber lebt von der ewigen Wiederkehr gleicher Themen, die sie immer wieder aktualisiert.’

The writer may turn to many different models of understanding to formulate his questions, and to venture with them to the very boundaries of human knowledge – sub limes. Despite the often very contemporary vocabulary, however, this is the most traditional, universal and serious of undertakings.

24 Hans Jürgen Balmes, ‘Ein Kompendium der Poesie. Raoul Schrotts neuer Gedichtband Tropen’, NZZ, 31 August 2000. The mystification of the feminine into a manifestation of the sublime is of course also a traditional trope. In Schrott’s work, however, this development is accompanied by an increasing ironisation of the narrative or lyric voice.

25 Raoul Schrott and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Mutmassungen über die Poesie, ed. Hubert Winkels and Denis Scheck, Berlin 1999 with 2 CDs, p. 54.