

On Sleep and Death in Goethe's *Euphrosyne*¹

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I. Hypnos, Thanatos and the Limits of Human Experience

When in today's language we commonly use terms such as 'entschlafen', 'nicht mehr aufwachen' or 'für immer einschlafen' as metaphors for death, we refer to a connection that had already been made in ancient Greek mythology. Hypnos (or Somnus), the God of sleep, is the brother of Thanatos, the God of death. Both are the son of Nyx, the Goddess of the night.² The tension that arises from this constellation heavily influenced the view on sleep and death in antiquity. Sleep was perceived as rest from the sorrows and constraints of life, but also had its dark side through its close connection with death. Death could come as a relief or as a cruel end to human life. In the *Apologia* Plato writes about the idea of a gainful death, clearly evoking the mythological triad of sleep, death and night.

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. If it is complete lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep, then death would be a great advantage. For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other night and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights. If death is like this, I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night.³

Dreamless sleep and death are brought together by man's inability to know anything about them. Plato here has a positive, if ironic, take on this lack of knowledge. If we regard death as being like a single, unique night in which we do not dream, rather than as a recurrent or common event, than the permanent amnesia of death ultimately relieves man from the burden of life. Behind the surface of Plato's seemingly comforting words there lurks, of course, the darker, more frightening, interpretation: Sleep keeps reminding us of the limits of our own existence, – that is death, the only certainty of human life, which nonetheless eludes our understanding. It is this stage of (un)consciousness that became increasingly important once

¹ This article has been written during my stay as Sylvia-Naish Fellow at the Institute for Germanic and Romance Studies, London, in the Germanic library – a space that sadly does not exist anymore.

A German version of this article is forthcoming with Königshausen & Neumann (2010).

² See the entries in *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike*, ed. by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2001), XI p. 712/2 (Somnus) and XII/1, p. 242/1 (Thanatos).

³ Plato, 'Apology', transl. by G. M. A. Grube, in, Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), pp. 17-36, here p. 35 (40d-41a).

the rise of psychology in the 18th century started challenging the explanatory power of theology. The turn to the subject required an investigation into the nature of the human mind. Consciousness, self-consciousness and the limits of our knowledge are the terms which would not only determine (Post-)Kantian philosophy in the 19th century but also shape modern philosophical discussion until today. The tensions between limitation and totality are constantly at stake in this new intellectual climate. Kant's philosophy is driven by the idea that only an exact definition of the limitations of our knowledge can give us an adequate idea of the whole. His distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason – that is between judgements based on cognition in the empirical realm and judgements based on experience in the moral realm – managed to secure man's freedom from determinism without sacrificing the unity of man and nature. For the Romantics, however, Kant's careful distinction highlighted that absolute truth was inaccessible to man. A new interest in the irrational was born out of the insight that philosophy was – as Schlegel put it – 'mehr ein *Suchen* der vollendeten Wissenschaft des Unendlichen, als diese Wissenschaft selbst'.⁴ Truth could only be shown in a negative turn: the fragment was regarded as the best way of representing the world precisely because its character denied any idea of totality.⁵ In the same way literature (*Poesie*) became the new philosophy, for its failure to show reality is closer to the truth than a self-contained philosophical system.⁶

How does Goethe fit in here? How did he deal with the demands that the unknown of sleep and death make on literary writing? Goethe famously tried to avoid the subject of death for most of his life, but on some occasions he faced up to the challenges of the crisis that death provides to man. One of these is the elegy *Euphrosyne*. Composed in 1797/98, in the heyday of German Idealism, it is a very dark poem. Goethe wrote it on the occasion of the death of Christine Becker, a celebrated young actress at the theatre in Weimar. He had been on his way back from Switzerland to Weimar when the news about her death – albeit long expected – 'überraschte [ihn] in den formlosen Gebirgen'.⁷ While the elegy's setting is strongly reminiscent of these words, at the same time the poem has a rather unusual air of the fantastic

⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Entwicklung der Philosophie in zwölf Büchern [Köln 1804-1805]', in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (et al.), (Schöningh: Paderborn, 1958-), sect. II, vol. XII, pp. 107-480, here p. 202.

⁵ See *Athenaeum. Eine Zeitschrift*, ed. by August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel, (H. Frölich: Berlin, 1798), Vol. 1/1. p. 54.

⁶ See Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53-56; see also Friedrich Schlegel *Athenaeum*, p. 25: 'Was in der Poesie geschieht, geschieht nie, oder immer. Sonst ist es keine rechte Poesie. Man darf nicht glauben sollen, dass es jetzt wirklich geschehe.'

⁷ Goethe to Böttinger (25. 10. 1797), in *Goethes Werke*, (Weimar: Böhlau, 1887-1919), sec. IV, vol. 12, p. 345.

about it. Twilight colours the tip of the mountains purple, the traveller's paths in the valley are covered in darkness.⁸ Uncanny and, when we think of the 'zackigen Gipfeln' in the first line or the 'tosenden Strom' in the fourth line, at points even hostile details determine the atmosphere of the poem's frame.⁹ The elegy's core is the encounter between the traveller and the ghost of the actress 'Euphrosyne' presented to us in an ingenious hybrid of a monologue masked as a dialogue. Drawing on their rehearsal of young Arthur's death in Shakespeare's *King John*, the actress asks the traveller to preserve her memory in art and thus to rescue her from the forgotten dead who live as shadows in Hades.

No doubt, *Euphrosyne* is a poem about death. But if we look at the elegy's framework we can see that, in line with the mythological pairing of Thanatos and Hypnos, it is also a poem about sleep that will also lead us into the realm of 'Halbschlaf'.

Tiefer liegt die Nacht um mich her; die stürzenden Wasser
 Brausen gewaltiger nun neben dem schlüpfrigen Pfad.
 Unbezwingliche Trauer befällt mich, entkräftender Jammer,
 Und ein moosiger Fels stützt den Sinkenden nur.
 Wehmuth reißt durch die Saiten der Brust, die nächtlichen Thränen
 Fließen, und über dem Wald kündet der Morgen sich an.¹⁰

The comparative 'tiefer' and 'gewaltiger' bring us back to the traveller's place in the valley at the poem's beginning. Tightly and securely they enclose the elegy's supernatural element. 'What has just happened?' is perhaps the traveller's as much as our, the readers', question. Goethe's answer to it is deliberately ambiguous. The traveller lies down on a rock and weeps nightly tears. Time seems to be of no importance until in the last line. While the enjambement of 'nächtliche Thränen / Fließen' imitates the previous movement of the waterfall's 'stürzende Wasser / Brausen' and thus suggests a hyperbolic congruence between nature and human sentiment, the flow of the elegiac couplet abruptly stops after the comma. A new main clause linked to the previous part of the sentence with the simple word 'und', a conjunction that does not give away anything, announces the dawn of the next day.¹¹ What could provide us with a

⁸ Possibly influenced by his comparison with Schiller's poem 'Der Spaziergang', Ziolkowski assumes that the traveller in *on* the mountain, – a decisive aspect for his conclusion that 'the poem is written in fulfilment of Euphrosyne's wish.' (Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Classical German Elegy 1795-1950*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 97-98.

⁹ On the theatrical dimension of the poem's setting see Roger Paulin, 'Goethe's Elegy "Euphrosyne"', in *Publications of the English Goethe Society 1999* (68), pp. 61-69, here p. 64-65, and Anthony Phelan, "'Euphrosyne" and the Theatres of *Faust Part Two*', in *Publications of the English Goethe Society 1990* (59), pp. 59-78, here pp.61-67.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Euphrosyne', in: *Goethes Werke*, sect. I, vol. 1, p. 281-286, here S. 286, ll. 147-152; all references given in the text refer to this edition.

¹¹ There is much comment on the 'und' of the last line and its (in)ability to counterbalance the poem's overall bleakness. See R.C. Ockenden, "'Ein schwankendes Los" – the death of Euphrosyne', in *Goethe at 250. London*

sense of temporal order and so enforce the framework's grip on the elegy's middle part ends up highlighting the gaps of our knowledge. What happened between dust and dawn? Was the traveller asleep? Was his encounter with the actress a dream? Behind the ostentatious efforts to contain the supernatural firmly within time and space the poem's end emphasises a state of in-between that is embedded in empirical reality and yet clearly eludes its grasp.¹² It is this state of in-between in which Goethe tries to explore what lies behind the boundaries of sleep and death. Here writing is pushed to the edges of human experience, and Goethe's way to deal with this challenge is likely to tell us something about his place in a cultural history of *Halbschlafbilder*.

II. Aesthetic and Epistemological Crises in *Euphrosyne*

In *Euphrosyne* death and art are intrinsically bound up with each other. The poem's middle part is dominated by a complicated layering of different levels of illusion in which the actress reminds the traveller – a poet, as his familiarity with the conventions of his genre shows¹³ – of their time on stage. Her perfect embodiment of the dying young Arthur in Shakespeare's *King John* is at the centre of the narration.

Und ich heuchelte lang, dir an dem Busen, den Tod.
Endlich schlug die Augen ich auf und sah dich, in ernste,
Stille Betrachtung versenkt, über den Liebling geneigt.
[...]
Fragte: warum, mein Vater, so ernst? und hab' ich gefehlet,
O! so zeige mir an, wie mir das Bess're gelingt.
[...]
Aber du faßtest mich stark und drücktest mich fester im Arme,
Und es schauderte mir tief in dem Busen das Herz. (ll. 52-54, 57-58, 61-62)

The scene's playfulness and erotic colouring cannot hide its tragic dimension, present also in the frequent repetition of the word 'ernst'. The simulated death on stage has become sad reality. In what sounds congruent Goethe hints at the fundamental difference between theatrical performance and the life it aims to imitate: plays (and presumably also poems) can

Symposium, ed. by T. J. Reed [et al.], (Munich: Iudicium, 2000), (Publications of the Institute of Germanic Studies 75), pp. 233-246, here p. 246, and Paulin, 'Goethe's Elegy "Euphrosyne"', p. 69.

¹² Cf. Paulin, 'Goethe's Elegy "Euphrosyne"', p. 66: [...] or, more likely, 'die nächtlichen Thränen / Fließen' (l. 151f.) is the elliptical expression or a night's weeping over the loss of Euphrosyne and her descent into the land of the shades, [...].'

¹³ See Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), II, 671.

only represent death but not the reality of it. Writing, it appears, has already reached its limits.¹⁴

Yet, the elegy's crisis goes far beyond matters of representation in art. Goethe seems to see its seed as planted in the conditions of human life, for – with ever escalating drive – the notion of repetition turns an aesthetic problem into an epistemological one. At the beginning of the narration the actress refers to her life as 'Unwiederbringliches' (l. 38). Death is the ultimate caesura that renders repetition impossible. In the passage on young Arthur's death, Goethe returns to this idea to highlight the manifest gap between death and its representation in art. The actress offers to repeat her performance ('Wiederhol' ich so gern' l. 60), and, in a sentence that forces the patters of repetition onto the metric structure of the pentameter, the traveller tells her to perform her role again tomorrow in front of a larger audience. 'Wie du es heute gezeigt, zeig es auch morgen der Stadt.' (l. 64) In the following paragraph Goethe's focus eventually shifts from art to nature.

Ach, Natur, wie sicher und groß in allem erscheinst du!
Himmel und Erde befolgt ein ewiges, festes Gesetz,
Jahre folgen auf Jahre, dem Frühling reichet der Sommer,
Und dem reichlichen Herbst traulich der Winter die Hand.
[...]
Alles entsteht und vergeht nach Gesetz; doch über des Menschen
Leben, dem köstlichen Schatz, herrscht ein schwankendes Loos.
Nicht dem blühenden nickt der willig scheidende Vater,
Seinem trefflichen Sohn, freundlich vom Rande der Gruft;
[...]
Öfter, ach! verkehrt das Geschick die Ordnung der Tage;
Hülflös klaget ein Greis Kinder und Enkel umsonst,
[...]
Und so, liebliches Kind, durchdrang mich die tiefe Betrachtung,
Als du zur Leiche verstellst über die Arme mir hingst;
(ll. 69-72, 77-80, 83-84, 87-88)

The security of a comprehensible law of nature gradually gives way to the lament of fate's unpredictable rule over man's life. Embodying a law of regular change as well as repetition, the classic metre and the passage's step by step move from the affirmation of nature's law, to its implicit presence in its negation and finally to its complete absence in the description try to contain what is incomprehensible to man. But when the last couplet returns to the initial death-scene the tension between the reality of the actress' death and its false performance in art highlights what eludes man's grasp.

¹⁴ Cf. Mathias Mayer, 'Liebende haben Thränen und Dichter Rhythmen: Natur und Kunst in Goethes "Euphrosyne"', in *Goethe Yearbook. Publications of the Goethe Society of North America* 1990 (5), pp. 145-162, here p. 149.

Only in the logic of the actress' account of the past events on stage can the law of nature remain unscathed. In a passage that is strongly reminiscent of the language which Goethe will deploy in 'Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen', the last elegy written in 1798, the actress recounts the note of encouragement that the traveller gave to her on that day.¹⁵

Immer strebe so fort, und deine natürlichen Gaben
Bilde, bei jeglichem Schritt steigenden Lebens, die Kunst.
Sei mir lange zur Lust und eh' mein Auge sich schließt,
Wünscht' ich dein schönes Talent glücklich vollendet zu sehn. –
Also sprachst du, und nie vergaß ich die wichtigen Stunde!
Deutend entwickelt' ich mich an dem erhabenen Wort. (ll. 93-98)

The law of metamorphosis brings together man and nature. It enables man to describe and understand the world of objects as well as himself. Once again death is present here and for a moment it seems to be possible to embed it into a natural cycle of mankind's development as a sequence of different generations. Yet Goethe's choice of word 'mein Auge sich schließt' is too close to the earlier phrase 'Nicht der Jüngere schließt dem Älteren immer das Auge' to ignore that such idea of the lawfulness of life is unable to deal with the reality and power of fate. And the course of events has already rendered it obsolete anyway, as the actress somewhat brutally acknowledges:

O wie bildet' ich mich an deinen Augen, und suchte,
Dich im tiefen Gedräng' stauender Hörer heraus!
Doch dort wirst du nun sein, und stehn, und nimmer bewegt sich
Euphrosyne hervor, dir zu erheitern den Blick, (ll. 101-4)

Returning to the issues of theatrical performance and death, the couplets show that underneath the surface it is not just the actress' untimely death as a work of fate that constitutes the poem's crisis. The reality of death as the ultimate cut, as something that remains beyond human experience, haunts the elegy. The role of structure is the key. It is through structure that man comes to understand life and it is through structure that art can imitate life. Fate, however, undermines the lawfulness of human life. It resists any attempt to incorporate it into structure and so to ascribe meaning to it. In this sense the poem's existential epistemological crisis is always a crisis of representation, too.

As a first, and preliminary, reflection on how Goethe fits in the various way of dealing with the notion of the (un)conscious in the early 19th century – it is important to note that this crisis of representation is very different from what occupied the Romantics. The elegy is

¹⁵ For a more detailed but also very different account of the similarities between 'Euphrosyne' and 'Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen' see Günter Peters, 'Das Schauspiel der Natur', in *Poetica. Zeitschrift für Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft* 1990 (22/1-2), pp. 46-83, esp. p. 60.

neither fragmentary nor suggests via its grand tone any fears about the instability of language and significance. The lack of totality which underlies the self-reflective gesture in Schlegel's 'progressiver Universalpoesie', is no issue for Goethe. Death is part of life, and the elegy tries to come to terms with it. In this sense Goethe's work in *Euphrosyne* seems to be an attempt at a definition of boundaries – the boundaries of our knowledge about the world. We will have to see if such attempt can eventually bring about more than a negative description of the unknown, justifying the belief in an unbroken unity of man and nature.

III. Figures of Redemption in *Euphrosyne*

There is a lot at stake in 'Euphrosyne'. It is one of the elegy's most poignant moments when the actress' pleas with the traveller to rescue her from the forgotten dead. But given our knowledge about the limitations of aesthetic representation, how is poetry supposed to achieve this? In her request, the recurring similarities to the language of the later elegy 'Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen' stands next to a call for interruption.

Andere kommen und gehn; es werden dir andre gefallen,
Selbst dem großen Talent, drängt sich ein größeres nach.
Aber du, vergesse mich nicht! wenn eine dir jemals,
Sich im verworrenen Geschäft heiter entgegen bewegt,
Deinem Winke sich fügt, an deinem Lächeln sich freuet,
[...]
Guter! dann gedenkest du mein, und rufest auch spät noch:
Euphrosyne, sie ist wieder erstanden vor mir! (ll. 107-11, 115-6)

The precise beat of the hexameter and the pentameter never ceases and yet the poem can only be successful if it can formulate a caesura to such regularity. Only a caesura – we could call it a 'cut' – can take us beyond art's inability to represent death and thus to give the poem meaning. Goethe employs a very risky strategy: the elegy's success depends on no less than its ability, to find a way to transcend its limitations.

One of the most impressive aspects of the elegy is its great visuality. Right at the beginning the ice at the top of the mountains and the shiny purple colour of the sunset divert our attention from the black and white page to the colourful pictures arising in our mind. It would probably be a fairly straightforward task to adopt the poem for a performance on stage, not least because the actress' appearance and disappearance from and into clouds itself is of great theatricality.¹⁶ Moreover, strong visual moments penetrate the language of the traveller and the actress. Thinking he has met a muse, the traveller asks the figure to reveal herself to

¹⁶ On the poem's theatricality see Phelan's detailed analysis in "'Euphrosyne" and *Faust Part Two*', pp. 61-67.

him ('enthülle dich mir' (l. 17), a request the actress counters with the question if he has already forgotten her and regards her as 'ein fremdes Gebild' (l. 24). And perhaps most importantly for our topic, Goethe describes the epistemological crisis not exclusively in abstract cognitive terms, but as a crisis of seeing, too. Words such as 'heuchelte' mark the actress' work as performance of a profession called the 'täuschende Kunst reizender Musen' (l. 36). When later the traveller's plea to the ghost not to deceive him from the poem's beginning ('Täusche, verschwindend / nicht den begeisterten Sinn [...] ' ll. 17-18) resonates in the actress' evocation of the traveller staging Hubert de Burgh in his inability to kill Arthur in *King John* ('drohtest mit Grimmiger Glut den armen Augen, und wandtest / Selbst den tränenden Blick, innig getäuscht hinweg,' ll. 47-48) and the issue becomes rather more existential. Goethe projects the traveller's fear to be deceived by his own eyes onto the logic of Shakespeare's play.¹⁷ Hubert there, having been sent to blend Arthur, eventually realises that he is the victim of deception and decides to spare Arthur's life. The shifts in the nexus of death, life and art are so numerous here that a clear distinction is increasingly hard to make.¹⁸ In what we can perhaps regard as the height of the poem's crisis, Goethe comes close to a radical scepticism, something we normally associate with Kleist's famous misunderstanding of Kant's philosophy. There is the constant threat that the poet's perception of the events is an illusion, a performance of his mind of which he is unaware.

This is not to say that the idea of writing and a poetic voice is not important to 'Euphrosyne'. On the contrary, vision and voice are intrinsically bound up with each other. And it is in this interplay that the elegy ultimately tries to achieve something lasting, something that can give meaning to the poem by taking it beyond its limitations. Throughout the elegy, references to vision are juxtaposed with references to writing and the poetic voice, often within the space of one couplet.

Aber ich hoffte mein **Bild** noch fest in des Freundes Erinnerung
Eingeschrieben und noch schön durch die Liebe verklärt. (ll. 27-28)
 [...]
 Wen der Dichter aber gerühmt, der wandelt, **gestaltet**,
 Einzel, gesellet dem Chor aller Heroen sich zu.
 Freuig tret' ich einher, **von deinem Liede verkündet**, (ll. 125-7)
 [...]
Bildete doch ein Dichter auch mich; und seine **Gesänge**,
 Ja, sie vollenden an mir, was mir das Leben versagt. (ll. 139-40)

¹⁷ Cf. Phelan, "'Euphrosyne" and *Faust Part Two*', p. 63: 'The poet's appeal is that the supposed goddess should not deceive him by disappearing.'

¹⁸ See Paulin, 'Goethe's Elegy "Euphrosyne"', p. 68, and Phelan, "'Euphrosyne" and *Faust Part Two*', pp. 64-65.

It is certainly common to use the verbs ‘bilden’ or ‘gestalten’ in the context of literary forms of art, none the less implicitly they always point us towards their origin in the visual arts. And in a poem that insists so much on the deceiving qualities of theatrical performance, such cross-references to different forms of artistic expression become highly self-conscious. It is almost too obvious that the poem which the actress demands from the traveller, is the poem we have in front of us. We find ourselves in a dense web of self-referentiality and a constant mediation of voices in a complex layering of narration. Art is represented and reflected in art to a degree, which – at points – brings the poem’s self-consciousness dangerously close to a self-sufficient artificiality. Is there more behind all this than the pure negativity of death expressed in those black letters on white paper that cannot bring to life the actress, that cannot create her image outside our mind?

Upon the end of the actress’s narration and her disappearance vision and voice suddenly take a different turn.

Also sprach sie, und noch bewegte der liebliche Mund sich
Weiter zu reden: allein schwirrend versagte der Ton.’ (ll. 141-42)

The voice slowly disappears over the course of the couplet, leaving the soundless image of the actress. It would be a smooth transition were there not the abrupt break between the hexameter and the pentameter. Between ‘sich’ and ‘weiter’ a void opens up. In this short moment the elegy realizes the silence emerging from the actress’ death, a silence that the poem so far could only describe in negative terms: ‘Du vernimmst sie nicht mehr die Töne des wachsenden Zöglings’ (l. 105). In a self-conscious turn the elegy has briefly glimpsed the life of the dead actress, balancing along the edge of linguistic expression and human understanding. When at the end of the poem the traveller, absolutely exhausted and inconsolable, falls asleep, the actress whom he mistook for a muse taught him a lesson about what art can do and what it cannot do: he now knows that death is the ultimate caesura beyond which nothing can reach and which nothing can reverse.¹⁹

Goethe’s attempt to write about the things that lie beyond our understanding takes the opposite direction from the romantic fascination for the irrational and its poetic potential that informs, for example, Jean Paul’s ‘Empfindbilder’.²⁰ In *Blicke in die Traumwelt* (1814), for

¹⁹ See Boyle, *Goethe*, II, 673; cf. Ziolkowski, *The Classical German Elegy*, p. 98: ‘On the mountain, then, the poet has been granted a new insight, a privileged experience, that modifies his tragic view of the contrasts between man and nature.’ Cf. Mayer, ‘Liebende haben Thränen’, p. 158: ‘[D]er Tod [...] die Erkenntnisart und Wesensverfassung von Dichtung bestimmt: Was Kunst werden will, muß aus dem Zusammenhang des Lebens herausgelöst werden und gewissermaßen sterben.’

²⁰ See for instance Novalis aphorism ‘Wir sind dem Aufwachen nah, wenn wir träumen, dass wir träumen.’, quoted by Schlegel in *Athenaeum*, p.78.

Jean Paul the ‘Empfindbilder’, the images which arise in front of our eyes at the edge of wake and sleep, are a means to mediate between the clarity of consciousness and the uncontrollable darkness of sleep. Arising suddenly (‘blitzend’) these images last only for a moment, yet their visual intensity evokes the sense of intuitive insight.²¹ Poetic language, Jean Paul continues, cannot compete with the power of these images. Literary works are restricted to ‘Vorstellbilder’, images which – controlled by the artist – lack ‘das frische Saftgrün und die plastische Breite und Länge geträumter Landschaften.’²² None the less the ‘Empfindbilder’ depend on their translation into ‘Vorstellbilder’, however inadequate this translation might be.²³ In short, writing has to permanently oscillate between ‘Empfindbilder’ and ‘Vorstellbilder’.

Die Ätherwelt des Dichters muss sich erst verdichten zur Wolkenwelt des Traums: in jener sind wir Schöpfer, in dieser Bewohner; jene schwebt uns als ferne Vergangenheit und Zukunft hoch oben, diese umfließt uns mit Gegenwart.²⁴

Here real\$ truth is only accessible in stages of the mind that normally lie beyond our grasp. With the power of their inspiration the ‘Empfindbilder’ are the starting point as well as the unattainable aim, the ‘Korrektiv und Utopie’ of literary production.²⁵

In contrast to that, the conclusion of Goethe’s elegy is extremely sober, however playful the poem’s self-referentiality might appear. What had happened between dawn and dusk only counts insofar as it had something to say about the traveller’s life in the valley. In the last few couplets Goethe puts a lot of emphasis on this reality. The physicality of a rock supporting the worn out traveller, his pain felt at the disappearance of the actress’s ghost draw a powerful picture of human suffering and contrasts strongly with much of the elegy’s flights of fancy / air of the fantastic. In the time that has elapsed since sunset at the beginning of the elegy, the traveller and with him the poet – for Goethe’s voice is so clearly audible here – walked along the edges of human understanding. The text’s images brought writing to its limits. But rather than embracing what eludes our faculties as revelation of truth, the elegy’s sudden silence points towards a distinction between what we can know and what we cannot know. Empirical reality has been the starting point of this journey as well as its end.

²¹ Jean Paul, ‘Blicke in die Traumwelt’, in idem, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Nibert Millar and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), sec. II, vol. 2: *Jugendwerke II, Vermischte Schriften I*, pp. 1017-1048, here p. 1023.

²² Paul, ‘Blicke in die Traumwelt’, p. 1022.

²³ Paul, ‘Blicke in die Traumwelt’, p. 1023.

²⁴ Paul, ‘Blicke in die Traumwelt’, p. 1022.

²⁵ Helmut Pfötenhauer, ‘Empfindbild, Gesichterscheinung, Vision: Zur Geschichte des inneren Sehens und Jean Pauls Beitrag dazu’, in idem, *Nicht völlig Wachen und nicht ganz ein Traum: Die Halbschlafbilder in der Literatur*, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), pp. 7-36, here p. 12; see *ibid* on a detailed discussion of Jean Paul’s ‘Blicke in die Traumwelt’.

It is in this way that what happens in *Euphrosyne* is similar to how Goethe deals with the optical phenomenon of afterimages which he described almost 30 years later in his review *Sehen in subjektiver Hinsicht, von Purkinije. 1819*.²⁶

Ich hatte die Gabe, wenn ich die Augen schloß und mit niedergesenktem Haupte mir in der Mitte des Sehorgans eine Blume dachte, so verharrte sie nicht einen Augenblick in ihrer ersten Gestalt, sondern sie legte sich aus einander und aus ihrem Innern entfalteten sich wieder neue Blumen aus farbigen, auch wohl grünen Blättern; es waren keine natürlichen Blumen, sondern phantastische, jedoch regelmäßig wie die Rosetten der Bildhauer. Es war unmöglich die hervorquellende Schöpfung zu fixiren, hingegen dauerte sie so lange als mir beliebte, ermattete nicht und verstärkte sich nicht.²⁷

Just as detailed observation helps to identify step by step the nature of a scientific phenomenon, so are language and writing means to explore the different aspects of human life. Self-observation, self-consciousness and self-referentiality are the prominent aspects here. Metaphorically speaking the parallel might even go further – and bring us back to ‘Halbschlaf’. We have seen that issues of self-consciousness and the tension between ideas of limitations and the unity of man and nature are not exclusive to Romantic thought. They are the key-words of (Post-)Kantian philosophy in general. If we regard *Halbschlaf* in more abstract terms, then what Jean Paul or later Poe describe becomes part of a larger phenomenon. Foreshadowing our own death, sleep brings us to the edge of human experience. *Halbschlafbilder* are part of the nexus of death, art and writing at the limits of our understanding. In this wider context we can turn to Goethe and his contribution on what to say about something that eludes our grasp. Like Goethe, with alert mind, closing his eyes in *Vom Sehen in subjektiver Hinsicht* the traveller’s experiences during the night in the valley seems to be closer to insomnia than to dreams. Just as he never reaches his destination, he never falls asleep in that night. There is only the hope that the next morning might bring him home. In the end, *Euphrosyne* is a poem on ethics rather than aesthetics.

²⁶ For a different interpretation of Goethe’s essay in relation to a cultural history of *Halbschlaf* see Pfothner, ‘Empfindbild, Gesichtserscheinung, Vision’, pp. 23-24, and Sabine Schneider, ‘Sehen in subjektiver Hinsicht? Goethes aporetische Projekt einer “Kritik der Sinne” und seine Interferenzen zur Romantik’, in, *Nicht völlig Wachen*, pp. 37-50, here pp. 43-47.

²⁷ *Goethes Werke* sec. II, vol. 11, p. 282.