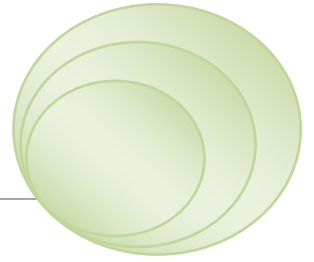


The Question of Negativity in Romantic Epistemology and Poetics



Filomena Vasconcelos
University of Porto

It was night in the lonesome October
Of my most immemorial year;

Edgar Alan Poe, "Ulalume" (i, 4-5)

Romantic idealism had a clear intuition of the importance of negativity at the very root of imagination and artistic creativity, as it constituted the principle of pure genius. Kant's critical thought, bringing about a new epistemology based on the (transcendental) subject's prevalence over the object, was a determining influence on German idealists like Fichte and Hegel. While in the 1790s, Fichte was defining the "I" ("the pure I") in negative terms, as opposed to the "Not-I", early in the nineteenth century Hegel proclaimed the absolute nature of the "I", as a dynamic principle, and distinguished the concept of "negativity" (*Negativität*) from other seemingly related concepts such as "nothingness" and "negation", as he opposed the dynamic nature of the former to the static, abstract nature of the latter.¹ In her thorough study of romantic and post-romantic currents in Western poetics, *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*, Kristeva describes Hegel's "negativity" as a "logical functioning of movement", a kind of fourth term in dialectics, a "mobile law" and "logical impulse", that at once "dissolves and connects" the "pure abstractions" of "nothingness" and "negation" (Kristeva 101). Echoing Kant's conception of aesthetic object and aesthetic judgment as pure uninterested contemplation (*Critique of Judgment* 1790), Friedrich Schlegel opposes the classical positive / pragmatic notions of the "utility" of poetry to the negativity of authentic poetry in its utter lack of utility and its "sacred silence", for it alone offers us the possibility of reverberating "the memory of our own Self and thus contemplate the world and



life" (*Lucinde. Ein Roman* 1799). Already in the early stages of Romanticism, around 1800, the possibility of a negative poetical semantics largely anticipates Mallarmé's nihilist poetics and, in general, all *fin-de-siècle* decadent and symbolist currents in their praise of "art for art's sake" values.

I will take on the Keatsian notion of "negativity" described in the poet's letters (1817-18) as a "Negative Capability": it accounts for the hollow nature of the poet's "unpoetical" identity, since a poet is, in Keats' own terms, a man of "no identity" who constitutes, therefore, "no character" but "is continually in for – and filling some other body" and the one "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".²

It is in terms of the subject's negativity – the poet's – as well as of the pragmatic negativity of his work that Romanticism operates the real rotation from the classical criteria of perceiving, understanding, defining and evaluating literature. Eventually, it is *literary* the work that does not confine itself to the imitation of the external world, nor does it aim at being merely the expression of one's subjective feelings and emotions, as clearly, and apparently erroneously, Wordsworth saw it. The poet of the "egotistical sublime", as Keats defines him, defended that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", even though he cannot help adding that poetry is "an emotion recollected in tranquility", that is to say, it relies always upon a doubled subjective experience processed within memory, being thus the fruit of a revisited moment in time (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 1800). The leap from the real referential experience to the inner imagined realms of memory is thus crucial for subsequent developments in Romantic and Post-romantic poetics. It is not the self's identity, in the poet's emotions and feelings, that is at stake, but the negative (hollow) space of imagination, perhaps close to Kant's *schema* (pl: *schemata*), also designed as a non-experienced mental trace or outline, sketch, monogram or minimal image (similar to a Euclidean geometrical diagram) that gives sense to *a priori* concepts.³ Schemata are therefore procedural rules, supposedly produced by imagination in relation to time in order to associate a non-empirical concept with a mental image of an object.⁴ Keats' Grecian Urn is perhaps already a symbolic representation of Keats' somehow *schematic* concept of Negative



Capability.⁵ In this frame of references, Romanticism gradually loses full control of the self's empirical / emotional substantiality by denying its referential importance as key motivation or pretext for artistic / poetic representation. Instead, subjectivity is now a linguistic sign which, together with poetic signs (understood as symbols), reflects and semantically absorbs the real meaning of external references, thus standing for the poet's subjective perceptions and intuitions. Literary is the work that radically takes fictionality as an end in itself, as pure originality, cutting off, as it were, with the usual authorial, referential and pragmatic instances.

Negativity in artistic / poetic representation brings forth the genial origin of art, which combines the deepest sense of irony, where also some instances of literary nonsense can be found, as well as representations of the marvelous and the fantastic, the most radical emerging at the unsurpassable distance that separates them from reality, within a logic of their own, autonomous and non-submissive to the grammatical logic of language that ties us up semantically to the world and things. It is a one-way trip, like Peter Pan's flight to Neverland, or Heinrich's search for the blue flower in Novalis's fragmentary prose poem novel, *Heinrich von Ofteringen*: fragmentary and inconclusive, Novalis's poem-as-novel opens up a full range of possibilities and impossibilities of reading, as it questions the very essence and meaning of the novel as genre, while enabling a renewed approach to allegory and myth.

In the constrained, artificial space of Edgar Allan Poe's writing, within the fantastic realms of his fictions and poems, death is not merely a mode of being (as non-being) opposed to life, for us to contemplate, to cry or lament; death is rather life's authentic and unique reality, as the negativity of whatever is unknown but certain, without which to exist is meaningless. Only from death as the negative category of space and time is life to be viewed, without ever allowing anyone a return trip: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence" (Edgar Allan Poe, *The Black Cat*).



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Despite and even against sense evidences, in their physical attachment to life's coordinates of time and space, Poe's narrative is in itself a pact with death's temporal and spatial voids, as it actually suspends our belief in the truth of facts represented (echoing Coleridge's famous formulation of "poetic faith" as "that willing suspension of disbelief", *Biographia Literaria* XIV), which thus becomes utterly unreasonable or nonsensical. As narrative persona, the black cat is also the metaphor of an absence – the logic of common-sense – standing against the background of all allegories of death which inevitably impend upon human life as its own and unique fate / destiny (destination). Ironically, though, the black cat of bad omen is not the murderer but the helpless victim of man's irrational and purely instinctual hatred. In a perverse game of perspectives and motivations, where a sensationalist voyeurism is intimately mixed up with a sadomasochist necrophilia and ethical values are questioned by superstitious beliefs, Poe reverses all meanings of what is understood as humanly sane or monstrous, of who or what is supposed to be the predator or the victim, the criminal or the innocent, and ultimately, what is to be regarded as literature or *kitsch*.

In the fracture that ever more explicitly poetic language creates with the language of communication, closing itself up in the negative interstices of self-referential language, and accompanying the somehow unaccepted or unacknowledged tightening of relationships between poetics and rhetoric, traditional logic is also sabotaged, for language clearly establishes itself as fundamental epistemological mediator between subjects and objects. The decline of the Romantic self, transcendental in its integrity, will definitely set the decline and end of all philosophy of subjectivity, opening the way to negativity and indeterminacy as possible alternatives for the new path epistemology is about to take.

If, with Aristotle as well as with Horace, "mimesis"/ "imitatio" provided art, in general, and literature, in particular, with a sound argument justifying and



legitimizing its existence, as a means to convey knowledge and moral values, the situation is completely reversed in Post-romantic poetics, towards the end of the nineteenth century: literature is above all a negative knowledge of the self and the world, demanding instead an intrinsic reading of the entire sign that poetic language constitutes; that is why Mallarmé calls it autotelic, i.e., a language that tells of itself, with no need of external references. From knowledge and representation of the world, in classical periods, from knowledge and representation of subjectivity, in Romanticism, literature now becomes knowledge of itself, as a legitimate linguistic being, i.e. in its own right. Knowledge is therefore semiosis, a process by which the world becomes readable through the signs inscribed in a semiotic universe, opening the way to Saussure's ideal, early in the twentieth century, of creating a general science of signs called "semiology". What is at stake, ultimately, is not the meaning and substance of knowledge itself, as something to be transmitted and which thus offers itself to communication, but rather the very nature of communication.

Friedrich Schlegel's "poetry of poetry", intensely echoed in Valéry's defense of "pure poetry" and of the utmost plasticity of poetic language (1937), the subversive self-referentiality of Poe's writing, or Mallarmé's voids of silence where no definite self or subjective voice are there to give meaning to words, as Keats had anticipated, will in turn give way to the authorial impersonality of masks or "personae" (conspicuously in Yeats and already present in Wilde), of heteronyms (as in Pessoa), of "objective correlatives" (as in Eliot), that so widely characterized modernist currents in the first decades of the twentieth century, though highly rooted in *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist and Decadent proposals.

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The 50s and 60s of the last century, in the full flourishing of Structuralism – mainly French, founded on Sartre's existentialist propositions – privileged a peculiar view of literature as a negative space of silence and death, thus proclaiming the "author's



death”, to quote Barthes’ famous expression in *S/Z*. In short, to say the author is dead means the fully acknowledged rejection of the ancestral ethical and aesthetical responsibility of the subject – as author – in the work he created and gave sense to. A possible parallel can be found in Brooks’ and Wimsatt’s notion of “intentional fallacy”, concerning the problem of textual meaning and its subsequent interpretation in American New Criticism. Nevertheless, and in tune with the steady dismantling of the Platonic logocentric tradition, the “author’s death” made literature finally an orphan, in other words, free from any limiting tutelage, existing only as negative linguistic instance: meanings were eventually seen as differential values within the textual discursive arrangement.

Obviously, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the concept of negativity, very closely linked to notions like uncertainty, instability and even absurdity, acquired new and broader meanings, deeply influenced by Kafka’s complex universe of impossibilities and absurdities, by Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche and Husserl, and Sartre’s existentialism. Bataille’s sacrificial vision of human life, beheaded (“acéfale”), and Heidegger’s musing around the philosopher’s death, leads Blanchot to return once more to Mallarmé’s notion of literary language so as to pronounce his own anti-realistic conception of literary language, within an aesthetics of negativity (*L’Espace Littéraire*, 1968) whereby the author is definitely extinguished as such, and death is no longer to be understood – or accepted – as an individual experience. Literature and death alike are for Blanchot experiences of anonymous passivity, i.e., of individual negativity.

Also, Bataille’s violent ideological break up with the prevailing patterns of stability, structure, school or movement of thought or art (even the avant-garde ones, e.g., Surrealism) constitutes the basis for his conception of a “basic-materialism” to deconstruct the traditional premises of materialism that would reverse the sets of common oppositions like “above” and “below”, “upper” and “lower”, “superior” and “inferior”. Derrida’s deconstructive process is but a step forward from Bataille’s, shaking the traditionally accepted philosophical oppositions between “spirit” and “matter” (so much ingrained in Cartesian rationalism) and opening up voids of uncertainty in the primacy of the “vox” over the “scripture”, in



the primacy of the unique sense / meaning over the pulverization of senses and meanings in a text, in the supremacy of the “book” over the fragment or over the text “latu sensu”, in the prevalence of authorial production over the reader’s response to a text.

Still a brief reference to Foucault who, while knowing and admiring Bataille, is not profoundly influenced by him, and who, like Derrida (strongly owing to Heidegger), in the heydays of Structuralism, became intensely critical of the “phenomenological-anthropological thought that dominates from Kojève to Sartre”, assuming therefore the “negative discourse on the subject”, as formulated by Lévi-Strauss in his critique of modernity (Habermas 1998: 225-6).⁶ By the end of the 1960s, in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), after *Les Mots et Les Choses* (1966), Foucault turns away from the anthropologic perspective, denouncing *a priori* concepts to describe the nature of the human subject, to focus on the role of discursive practices in the constitution of subjectivity. His gradual withdrawal from Structuralism is noticeable, however, in the philosopher’s steadier rejection to view history from the standpoint of the philosophy of subjectivity, dominated by the synthetic nature of transcendental consciousness. Foucault’s main concern is not so much with the homogeneity but rather with the differences that constitute a-subjective thought and will, operating on time through a “power” (a deliberate Nietzschean reference) that can be felt on the random contingencies of discourse.

Habermas’ *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) is a fundamental work to understand the complex problematic around the slow agonizing decline of the philosophy of subjectivity, but also the various alternatives to surpass it, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century: visions and echoes that irrevocably remind us of Einstein’s relativity (first issued as the strict relativity theory in 1905), as it also becomes reformulated, disintegrated, questioned by Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle”, which in the end is also a principle of negativity. Habermas distinguishes the opposite, though ultimately complementary, roles of both the archaeologist (a stoic viewer) and the historian (as genealogist) to explain history as a set of bizarre and arbitrary discursive formations: “Under the stoic eyes of the archaeologist, history becomes dormant, sitting in an *iceberg*



covered by the crystalline forms which are the arbitrary discursive formations. But, as to each of these formations belongs the autonomy of a universe without origins, the historian is left only with the work of the genealogist so as to explain the occasional provenance of those bizarre formations from hollow neighboring forms, i.e., the ones closer: discursive formations move, mix up, go up and go down. The genealogist explains these ascending and descending movements with the help of numerous events (happenings) but of one only hypothesis – the one that says that the only prevailing thing is the power that always turns up again and again under new masks whenever subjugating processes change” (Habermas 1998: 239).

Furthermore, Habermas clarifies that the nature of the event (*das Geschehen*, somehow indebted to Foucault’s *évènement*) is nothing positive, no fact historically asserted like “a decision, a contract, a reign or a battle”, but a movement in negativity, a functional and relational space, such as “the inversion of a force relationship, the downfall of a certain power, a language that has suffered reformulations and is now used against those who speak it”. *Geschehen* is, therefore, also “slackening” and “poisoning”, so to say, self-poisoning of a certain action giving way to another one in disguise (*ibidem*).

Perhaps one can inscribe in the self-poisoning disintegrating notion of the “event” – *Geschehen* – Morin’s description of our planet Earth. In its origin, Earth might have been nothing but “a pile of cosmic residues (trash) originated in a solar explosion” and only afterwards might a certain organization of matter have taken place in a “dialogic” relating order – disorder – organization. Volcanic eruptions, explosions, earthquakes and violent shocks of aerolites determined Earth’s physiology and geography, and perhaps one of these phenomena may have originated the formation of the Moon (Morin 90).

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Time now to return to some hypothetical, perhaps even random, point of our departure. Again we read Poe in between the lines of instability opened by the



uncertain nature of Habermas' "event", which may even comprehend the fragmentary and chaotic origins of Earth and Moon, and account for Blanchot's disturbingly vague frontiers of death and literature, for Bataille's perverse beheading (*acefalism*), for Derrida's sense *aporias*, for all negativity that in a text, within its silences, its pauses, its blank margins, goes far beyond the uttered words:

Our talk had been serious and sober
 But our thoughts they were palsied and sere –
 Our memories were treacherous and sere –
 For we knew not the month was October,
 And we marked not the night of the year –
 (Ah, night of all nights in the year!)
 We noted not the dim lake of Auber –
 (Though once we had journeyed down here) –
 Remembered not the dank tarn of Auber,
 Nor the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

"Ulalume" (iii)

¹ See *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 1807; *Science of Logic*, 3 vols: 1811, 1812, 1816 (revised 1831).

² Letter to John Taylor, Feb., 27th, 1818.

³ See Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781 (2d ed. 1787).

⁴ As Kant specifies: "[T]he schema of sensuous concepts (such as of figures in space) is a product and, as it were, a monogram of the pure imagination *a priori*. Images become possible only through the schema. But the images must always be connected with the concept only by means of the designated schema. Otherwise, the images can never be fully congruent to the general concept" (Kant 2000: 142).

⁵ Discussing Kant's schemata in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Todorov quotes Schelling's interpretation of Kant's opposition of two types of representation, the schematic and the symbolic, fused with Goethe's opposition between the allegoric and the symbolic representations. Schemata are pure conceptual representations, whereas allegories represent actions, and symbols, art: "Cette représentation (*Darstellung*) dans laquelle le général signifie le particulier, ou dans laquelle le particulier est appréhendé à travers le général, est le schématique. Cette représentation cependant dans laquelle le particulier signifie le général, ou dans laquelle le général est appréhendé à travers le particulier, est allégorique. La synthèse des deux, où ni le général ne signifie le particulier, ni le particulier le général, mais où les deux sont absolument un, est le symbolique. [...] La pensée est pur schématisme, toute action au contraire est allégorique (car significatif comme particulier un général), l'art est symbolique" (*apud* Todorov 245, 246).

⁶ All quotations from Habermas' work report to the Portuguese translation (1998) from the German original (1985). The English version of the quoted excerpts is my own translation.

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