

The Night-Death binomial as a poetic ploy - a cross-cultural look from the Graveyard Poets to Expressionism

O binômio Noite-Morte como estratagema poético – um percurso do século XVIII ao Expressionismo

Lioba Simon-Schuhmacher

Universidad de Oviedo, Oviedo, Espanha.

lioba@uniovi.es

Abstract: The essay describes the use of the Night-Death binomial and tracks its evolution from the eighteenth century to Expressionism across Great Britain, Germany, Spain, and Austria, at the hand of poems such as Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1745), Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, (1800), José Blanco White's sonnet "Night and Death" (1828), and Georg Trakl's "Verwandlung des Bösen" (1914). Romanticism brought along a preference for the nocturnal: night, moonlight, shades and shadows, mist and mystery, somber mood, morbidity, and death, as opposed to the Enlightenment's predilection for day, light, clarity, and life. The essay analyses how poets from different national contexts and ages employ images and symbols of the night to create an association with death. It furthermore shows how, with varying attitudes and results, they manage to convert this binomial into a poetic ploy.

Keywords: Night-Death binomial; Graveyard poets; Romanticism; Expressionism; Edward Young; Novalis; Blanco White; Trakl.

Resumo: O ensaio propõe uma reflexão sobre o binômio Noite-Morte, seguindo sua evolução a partir do século XVIII até a época

do Expressionismo na Grã-Bretanha, Alemanha, Espanha e Áustria, analisando os poemas “Night Thoughts” (1745), de Edward Young, “Hymnen an die Nacht” (1800), de Novalis, o soneto “Night and Death” (1828), de José Blanco White, e “Verwandlung des Bosen” (1914), de Georg Trakl. No decorrer do Romantismo houve uma preferência pelo Noturno: a noite, o luar, as máscaras e as sombras, a névoa e o mistério, o humor sombrio, a morbidez e a morte, em contraste com a iluminação, que privilegiaria o dia, a luz, a claridade e a vida. O estudo questiona o fato de poetas de diferentes nacionalidades e épocas utilizarem imagens e símbolos da noite, em associação com a morte, além de mostrar que através de atitudes e resultados diversos, eles conseguem converter o binômio Noite-Morte em estratégia poética.

Palavras-chave: binômio Noite-Morte; poetas morbidos; Romantismo; Expressionismo; Edward Young; Novalis; Blanco White; Trakl.

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It is generally assumed that Romanticism brought along an encompassing preference for the nocturnal: night, moonlight, shades and shadows, mist – and mystery –, somber mood, morbidity, and death, as opposed to the paramount attachment of the previous century to day, light, clarity, and life. Paradoxical as it may seem, the development towards this romantic enhancement of gloom can be traced back to the age of *Enlightenment*, to the so called “Graveyard Poets”. That movement, also known as the “Churchyard Poets” (a controversial label given to it later by the Victorians), was characterised by meditations on death and mortality, in a typically dreary mood. The elegy was the preferred form to frame the impressions of the writers (usually poets), typically set in an evening or nighttime scenario. Stirring the public mind with their predilection for nocturnal gloom, these poets notably contributed to paving the way for Romanticism. Furthermore, they are often reckoned as precursors of the Gothic movement in literature.

According to some critics, they originated with Thomas Parnell’s (1679–1718) *A Night-Piece on Death* (published posthumously in 1721),

considered the earliest poem of the Graveyard school. The opening lines present a nighttime scenario:

By the blue Tapers trembling Light,
No more I waste the wakeful Night,
Intent with endless view to pore
The Schoolmen and the Sages o'er:

The title *A Night-Piece on Death* already suggests an association of night with death. As the poem unfolds, thoughts on death, on the poet's "melancholy State", as well as references to graves and bones are underpinned by nocturnal images such as "[...] livid gleams of Night" and "midnight Ground".

Paralleling these concepts until converting them into the binomial "Night-Death" became increasingly popular, and reached its highest degrees in the first part of the nineteenth century, with the Romantic movement. It is sometimes complemented by other binomials with opposing concepts, such as: death-life, night-day, darkness-light, moon-sun, sickness or frailty-health. Apart from poetry, these can be traced in all literary genres and arts of the age (novel, theatre and opera, music, sculpture, painting, etc.) and in almost all European countries, some of which will be mentioned in this essay.

But first let us have another look at the "Graveyard Poets" as precursors of this movement and outline their stress on the nocturnal. Thomas Gray (1716–1771), with his famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), stands in the group of poets prone to this nighttime atmosphere filled with references to death. It contains the author's reflections on mortality while he is in a typical English rural graveyard, shortly after sunset. The opening lines presage the sulky mood: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, (...) And leaves the world to darkness and to me". Thus, the scene is set to give vent to Gray's conjectures about the (mostly humble) people buried there, and on death as a leveller. The poet's meditations are accompanied by ominous sounds (the knell of the bell as a curfew, "the moping owl does to the moon complain"). Among the images evoked, the reader finds "that yew-tree's shade", "tomb", "vault", "silent dust", "the dull cold ear of Death", with an epitaph that contains the term "melancholy", and summarises the mood conveyed in the 128 lines of this poem. All is significantly set against a nocturnal scenario.

Oliver Goldsmith's (1730–1774) 430-line poem “The Deserted Village” (1770) is likewise placed in an evening atmosphere. It contains reflections on the destruction of the peasants' home ground, the decline of traditional values as rooted in the country, and the passing of time.

William Cowper's (1731–1800) elegy “The Castaway” (written in 1799) provides an emotionally striking account of a man being washed overboard as a metaphor of the poet's own forlornness, who sees himself as “a destined wretch [...] Of friends, of hope, of all bereft”. The poem opens with a nocturnal image in the superlative degree to create the appropriate scenario: “Obscurest night involved the sky”.

Edward Young's (1683–1765) long poem, consisting of almost 2,500 lines, *The Complaint*, better known as *Night Thoughts*, which deals with *Life, Death and Immortality*, was published in 1742, followed by other “Nights”, the eighth and ninth (1745). The loss of his wife and friends inspired this poem, in which the author bewails human frailties in general. The best-known line in the poem is the adage “procrastination is the thief of time”, as part of a passage on how quickly life and opportunities can slip away.

The poem opens thus:

Tired Nature's sweet restorer, balmy **Sleep!**
 He, like the world, his ready visit pays
 Where Fortune smiles; the wretched he forsakes;
 Swift on his downy pinion flies from woe,
 And lights on lids unsullied with a tear.
 From short (as usual) and disturb'd **repose**,
 I wake: how happy **they, who wake no more!**
 Yet that were vain, if dreams infest **the grave**.
 I wake, emerging from a sea of dreams
 Tumultuous; where my wreck'd desponding thought
 From wave to wave of fancied misery
 At random drove, her helm of reason lost.
 Though now restored, 'tis only change of pain,
 (A bitter change!) severer for severe:
 The day too short for my distress; and **night**,
 Even in **the zenith of her dark domain**,
 Is sunshine to the colour of my fate.
Night, sable goddess! from **her ebon throne**,
 In rayless majesty, now stretches forth

Her leaden sceptre o'er a **slumbering world**.
Silence, how **dead!** and **darkness**, how **profound!**
 Nor eye, nor listening ear, an object finds;
Creation sleeps. 'Tis as the general pulse
 Of **life stood still**, and nature made a pause;
 An awful pause! **prophetic of her end**.
 And let **her prophecy be soon fulfill'd**;
 Fate! drop the curtain; I can lose no more.
Silence and darkness: solemn sisters! twins
 From **ancient Night**, who nurse the tender thought
 To reason, and on reason build resolve
 (That column of true majesty in man),
 Assist me: I will thank you in **the grave**;
The grave, your kingdom: there this frame shall fall
 A victim sacred to **your dreary shrine**.
 But what are ye?—¹

About a dozen instances of night, together with its associated features: sleep, silence, and darkness, can be identified in these first lines. Consequently, an alignment with death is suggested: “Creation sleeps”, hence it is “prophetic of her end” (i.e., death). In his sorrowful awareness of being awake (i.e., alive), the poet envies those who have died: “I wake: how happy they, who wake no more!” and wishes to die soon, too: “let her prophecy be soon fulfill'd;/ Fate! drop the curtain; I can lose no more”, thus covertly implying the idea of suicide, which was to become so fashionable a few decades later. Moreover, here the grave is equivalent to the kingdom of night, and to “silence and darkness”.

Night Thoughts enjoyed a high reputation after its first publication, which even increased due to the major series of illustrations by William Blake in 1797. Young exerted a seminal influence all over Europe. The Spaniard José Cadalso is just one example, with his long poem *Lugubrious Nights* (*Noches Lúgubres*, written around 1775, published between 1789 and 1790). The British poet soon became a symbol for the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, and exerted a notable spell on that restless generation. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) is said to have told his sister in 1766 that he was learning English from Young and

¹Emphasis added by the author of this essay

Milton; and in his autobiography he confessed that Young's influence had created the atmosphere for his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), a ground-breaking work in European Romanticism, which enjoyed a universal response, as stated by Rolf Engelsing (1974, p. 314).

One of the most outstanding early romantic poets in Europe was the German Georg Phillip Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known under his pen name Novalis (1772–1801). His great mystic work *Hymnen an die Nacht* (*Hymns to the Night*) was written between 1797 and 1800, and consists of six hymns (some in prose, some in verse), which can be divided into three pairs or cycles. The first of each pair describes the – for Novalis – typical model in three stages from life unfolding in a joyful, earthly realm of light towards a moment of painful alienation, followed by the liberation in an eternal night. The second of each pair describes the sobering awakening from that vision and the yearning to return to it, epitomized in the climax of night and death of the sixth and last hymn, which is of utmost interest in the line of argumentation of this essay. Moreover, the three cycles are conceived in an in-crescendo pattern; in each of these steps a higher level of experience and knowledge is achieved.

As stated by Jiang Chengyong (2008),

German romantic literature is characterized by morbidity and decadence, which covertly express the ideal of self extension and individual freedom particularly embodied in Novalis and Hoffmann. Novalis, known as “Macabre Poet”, attempts to comprehend the meaning of life by eulogizing night and death, hence showing his persistent belief in life with a hidden extending self.

Abundant references to the night are featured throughout Novalis's six hymns, with a variety of adjectives, such as: “*zu der heiligen, unaussprechlichen, geheimnißvollen Nacht*” [“to the holy, unspeakable, mysterious night”] (Hymn 1); “*dunkle Nacht*” [“dark night”] (Hymns 1 and 6); “*der wahrhaften Nacht*” [“the real night”] (Hymn 2); “*eine Nacht der Wonne*” [“one night of bliss”] (Hymn 5); “*die ew'ge Nacht*” [“the endless night”] (Hymns 5 and 6). Novalis significantly aligns in binomials symbols of the day (e.g., “*die Sonne*” [“the sun”] and “*das allerfreulichste Licht*” [“the all-joyous light”] in Hymn 1) and of the night (e.g., “*der Schlaf*” [“sleep”] and “*in [...] dem braunen Safte des Mohns*” [“the brown juice of the poppy”] in Hymn 2), etc. He plays with

these opposing concepts; sometimes he sets day and night against each other and, on an extended level, life and death (e.g., Hymn 4). Thus he creates spellbinding associations, occasionally verging on paradoxes as in this oxymoron, in which night is associated with sun, light, and life:

[...] **the eternal eyes which the Night hath opened within us**. Farther they see than the palest of those countless hosts – needing no aid from the light, they penetrate the depths of a loving soul – that fills a loftier region with bliss ineffable. Glory to the queen of the world, to the great prophet of the holier worlds, to the guardian of blissful love – she sends thee to me – thou tenderly beloved – **the gracious sun of the Night**, – now am I awake – for now am I Thine and Mine – **thou hast made me understand that Night is life** – made of me a human being – consume with spirit-fire my body, that I, turned to finer air, may mingle more closely with thee, and then our bridal night endure forever.²

This pervading fascination for night and darkness, “this life of shadows” [“*Schattenleben*”] (Hymn 5), consequently leads to the climax in the last hymn, which is titled “Longing for Death” (“*Sehnsucht nach dem Tode*”). Here Novalis overtly associates night with death, yet with a liberating stance, with clear references to religious concepts and imagery. Thus he says:

Into the **bosom of the earth**,
Out of the Light’s dominion,
Death’s pains are but a bursting forth,
Sign of **glad departure**.

²⁴...**die unendlichen Augen, die die Nacht in uns geöffnet**. Weiter sehn sie, als die blässesten jener zahllosen Heere – unbedürftig des Lichts durchschaun sie die Tiefen eines liebenden Gemüths – was einen höhern Raum mit unsäglicher Wollust füllt. Preis der Weltköniginn, der hohen Verkündigerinn heiliger Welten, der Pflegerinn seliger Liebe – sie sendet mir dich – zarte Geliebte - **liebliche Sonne der Nacht**, – nun wach ich – denn ich bin Dein und Mein – **du hast die Nacht mir zum Leben verkündet** – mich zum Menschen gemacht – zehre mit Geisterglut meinen Leib, daß ich luftig mit dir inniger mich mische und dann ewig die Brautnacht währt.”

NOVALIS. Hymnen an die Nacht. 1799/1800. [Emphasis added by the author of this essay]

Swift in the narrow little boat,
Swift to the heavenly shore we float.

Blessed be **the everlasting Night**,
And blessed **the endless slumber**.
We are heated by the day too bright,
And withered up with care.
We're weary of a life abroad,
And we now want our Father's home.³

“The everlasting Night” and “the endless slumber” are, of course, metaphors for death. Night and death as heralds of a new world of bliss and freedom (occasionally associated with spiritual or religious redemption, such as reaching “our Father’s home” in Hymn 6) is a quite extended ploy in Romanticism, especially in Germany. No wonder, one might reason, the suicide rate among (notably mainly male) youths dramatically increased during those decades.

Though not everything is dark and dreary in Romanticism (let us just recall “The Daffodils” by Wordsworth), yet the pervading note across all Europe, and especially in poetry, is rather one of gloom, moonlight, and night, as opposed to sunlight and day.

Many more examples of worshipping the night could be provided, and they are matched by other forms of art of that age, such as music and painting. Frédéric Chopin, for example, composed between 1827 and 1846 twenty-one short pieces for piano called *Nocturnes*. Another famous *Nocturne* is that of Felix Mendelssohn in *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), started in 1826. Furthermore, Franz Schubert's *Nachtstück* (Night Piece, D672) from 1819 is another typical romantic composition. On the other hand, especially during Romanticism, figurative art and painting is so full of night and moonlight scenes that any attempt

³“Hinunter **in der Erde Schooß**,/ Weg aus des Lichtes Reichen,/ **Der Schmerzen Wuth und wilder Stoß**/ Ist froher Abfahrt Zeichen./ Wir kommen in dem engen Kahn/ Geschwind am Himmelsufer an.// Gelobt sey uns **die ewge Nacht**,/ Gelobt **der ewge Schlummer**./ Wohl hat der Tag uns warm gemacht,/ Und welk der lange Kummer./ Die Lust der Fremde ging uns aus,/ Zum Vater wollen wir nach Haus.”

NOVALIS. *Hymnen an die Nacht*. 1799/1800. [Emphasis added by the author of this essay] Note: It is worth stating that the translator took the liberty to convert “Der Schmerzen Wuth und wilder Stoß” into plain “death”.

at listing even a partial summary would exceed the scope of this paper.⁴

A further outstanding example of the association of night with death is the following sonnet, written by José María Blanco White (Sevilla, 1775 – Liverpool, 1841), a Spaniard who turned his back on his country. Since he opposed both the French invasion of Spain and the absolute monarchy, this free spirit took exile in England in 1810. He changed his name “José” into “Joseph” and adopted his second surname from his paternal Irish grandfather, and even renounced Catholicism to embrace active Protestantism. Later in life he found a spiritual home in the Unitarian Community. From London he ran the monthly periodical *El Español* (1810–1814), which supported the struggle for the colonies’ independence and was widely read overseas. This was the final straw to establish him as a pariah in his home country, to which he never returned.⁵ In his excellent English he wrote the sonnet “Night and Death” (1828), which made an impression on Coleridge, to whom it was dedicated, and who described it as “the finest and most grandly conceived sonnet in our language”. Moreover, the critic Leigh Hunt praised it and said that in point of *thought* “it stands supreme, perhaps above all in any language: nor can we ponder it too deeply, or with too hopeful a reverence”, as stated in Main (1881, p. 397). Blanco White’s sonnet found its way into several anthologies of the English literature.⁶ Here follows the original version in English, which was later translated into several languages, including Spanish. As Menéndez Pelayo states, “perhaps the translation by Pombo is most faithful to the thought, possibly because it does not stick too closely to the form”.⁷

⁴Perhaps at least Caspar David Friedrich’s painting “Mondaufgang über dem Meer” (“Moonrise over the sea”, 1822) should be mentioned.

⁵For more detail, please refer to Blanco White’s autobiography and to the works of Martin Murphy listed under “References” at the end of this essay.

⁶Thus, it became part of David M. Main’s collection *Three hundred English Sonnets*, Blackwood, Edinburgh and London, 1886 (p.174), and was printed in many other anthologies.

⁷[...] tal vez en la traducción de Pombo se conserva más fielmente el pensamiento, acaso porque no se encadenó con estrecha sujeción al respeto de la forma.” Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*. (1880-1882). Here is Pombo’s translation, as included in aforesaid work (p.492):

“Al ver la noche Adán por vez primera/
Que iba borrando y apagando el mundo,
Creyó que, al par del astro moribundo,
La creación agonizaba entera.//
Mas, luego, al ver

Sonnet: “Night and Death” (1828) by Rev. Joseph Blanco White⁸

Dedicated to S.T. Coleridge, Esq. By his sincere friend, Joseph Blanco White.

Mysterious Night! When our first parent knew
Thee, from report divine, and heard thy name,
Did he not tremble for this lovely frame,
This glorious canopy of light and blue?

Yet, ‘neath the curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting flame,
Hesperus, with the host of heaven, came,
And lo! Creation widened in man’s view.

Who could have thought such darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, o Sun! Or who could find,
Whilst fly, and leaf, and insect stood revealed,

That to such countless Orbs thou mad’st us blind!
Why do we then shun Death with anxious strife?
If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?

As stated by the eminent literary historian Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo,

The capital idea of Blanco’s sonnet is beautiful and poetic beyond any ponderation. It depicts Adam’s terror when first contemplating the night – he assumes that the world should perish in its darkness. A pity that the style, even though it is delicate and exquisite, seems, brimming with picturesque details, more close to a Lake Poet miniature

lumbreira tras lumbreira/ Dulce brotar, y hervir en un segundo/ Universo sin fin..., vuelto en profundo/ Pasmado de gratitud, ora y espera.// Un sol velaba mil; fue un nuevo Oriente/ Su ocaso, y pronto aquella luz dormida/ Despertó al mismo Adán pura y fulgente.// ¿Por qué la muerte al ánimo intimida?/ Si así engaña la luz tan dulcemente,/ ¿Por qué no ha de engañar también la vida?”

⁸José María Blanco y Crespo, alias Blanco White.

than to a vigorous Miltonian canvas. It contains, however, lines of odd beauty; none equal to the last: if light can deceive us, how should life not do, too?"

No matter whether a “miniature” or a “canvas”, in this sonnet the figurative association of night with death comes out strongly. Adam has the frightful intuition that the fall of the first night, an experience hitherto unknown and unexplained to him, will be the end of the world and, therefore, of his own life. The poet – and the reader – might well regard this fear in a condescending way (“Did he not tremble”, Blanco White asks rhetorically), which is a strategy to introduce the main idea. A parallelism between night and death is established, similar to another parallelism between light and day. Adam’s fears represent those of humankind, unable to see what lies beyond the known world, were it not for the guidance and knowledge of a superior being, as the poet expresses (“Who could have thought such darkness lay concealed/ Within thy beams, o Sun!”). Moreover, in this comparison, the day, which is certain to come after the night, represents eternal life, and is, in the poet’s belief, as sure to be expected by humankind after death as day after night should have been expected by Adam, if only *we*, if only *he* knew or *believed*: this is the poet’s key statement. Blanco White, a strong believer and clergyman, soothingly concludes with this rhetorical question: “Why do we then shun Death with anxious strife?”

Not just in Romanticism, but also during the rest of the nineteenth century and all over Europe, night plays an important role in literature, especially in poetry. In France, Alfred de Musset (1810–1857) wrote the cycle of poems *Les Nuits* (1835-1837), and, two decades later, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) included a poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal* titled “Harmonie du soir” (1857).

Let us now move on several decades to the dramatically inspiring young Austrian expressionist poet Georg Trakl (1887–1914). Trakl

⁹“La idea capital es hermosa y poética sobre toda ponderación. Retrata el espanto de Adán al contemplar por primera vez la noche y pensar que en sus tinieblas iba a perecer el mundo. ¡Lástima que el estilo con ser delicado y exquisito, parezca, por sobra de pormenores pintorescos, más digno de una miniatura lakista que de un vigoroso cuadro miltoniano. Tiene sin embargo, versos de peregrina hermosura; ninguno como el último: Si la luz nos engaña, ¿cómo no ha de engañarnos la vida?” Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*. (1880-1882). CSIC edition (Consejo Superior de Ediciones Científicas), 1992, Vol. II ps.1127-1128.

belongs to the group of modernist writers of the early twentieth century who, in the wake of Poe, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, opposed the classical idea of beauty and paid tribute to the aesthetic of the Ugly. Obscurity and despair run as a tenor through his poems. He seemed to be motivated by what is corrupt, decadent, and morbid. In his poem “Transformation of evil”, the nocturnal and death are aligned:

A dead man visits you.
 Out of the heart runs the self-spilt blood
 And in black eyebrows nests the ineffable moment;
 Dark encounter.
 You – a crimson moon, as the One appears in the green
 shade
 Of the olive tree.
 Thereafter follows eternal night.¹⁰

Here a dead man ominously appears as the herald of the “eternal night” that is to follow. The association between death and night can be deemed in line with the examples analysed in the other poems of this essay, yet in Trakl it adopts a sheer uncomfortable, almost bedevilled stance. Trakl’s poetic expressiveness is derived from exploiting the human fears of dissolution and decay, death and corruption. As Alexander Stillmark states in his introduction to a bilingual edition of Trakl’s poems, these are difficult to interpret, even if one approaches them by attuning oneself to their mood and tone, and attempting to share his vision of existence, marked both by courage and despair.

In the following lines, which belong to Trakl’s poem “Springtime of the Soul II” (“Frühling der Seele II”), from the same period, we come across another binomial of night and death in the form of “the terrible paths of death” and “the cliffs of night”:

¹⁰“Ein Toter besucht dich./ Aus dem Herzen rinnt das selbstvergossene Blut/ Und in schwarzer Braue nistet unsäglicher Augenblick;/ Dunkle Begegnung./ Du – ein purpurner Mond, da jener im grünen Schatten/ Des Ölbaums erscheint./ Dem folgt unvergängliche Nacht.”

In: TRAKL. “Verwandlung des Bösen”, in *Poems and Prose*, p. 58-59

Pureness! Pureness! Where are the terrible paths of death,
Of grey stony silence, the cliffs of night
And the shadows without peace? Radiant sunny abyss.¹¹

Moreover, considering that these poems were written shortly before World War I, they seem tinged with foreboding. Trakl was a man of exceptional sensibility and highly vulnerable; his inner life torn by perpetual conflicts and extremes. He embraced the idea of death not only in writing: a few months after the outbreak of the military confrontation, having lapsed into depression when serving at the Eastern European front, he opted for his very own “radiant sunny abyss” and committed suicide.

In conclusion, as the examples from poetry of different European national contexts and ages provided in this essay have shown, the spectre of night and death looms large in the poetic fiction of the two centuries from Enlightenment to Modernism. In a significant number of cases, this association has been converted into a binomial, with varying effects, from soothing or even liberating, as in Romanticism, to utterly disconcerting, as in Expressionism. In the end, the binomial has been effectively converted into a poetic ploy.

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¹¹“Reinheit! Reinheit! Wo sind die furchtbaren Pfade des Todes,/ Des grauen steinernen Schweigens, die Felsen der Nacht/ Und die friedlosen Schatten?/ Strahlender Sonnenabgrund.”

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