Carl Grosse’s Der Genius, or: Contingency and the Uncanny in Cultural Transfer

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Carl Grosse’s four-volume Gothic novel Der Genius. Aus den Papieren des Marquis C* von G** was published from 1791 to 1795 in Halle. Grosse’s Genius is – even in the English-speaking countries – better known than one would suppose at first glance. Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, a novel she probably began writing in 1798 and which was published posthumously in 1817, has one of world literature’s first and most famous scenes parodying the contemporary Gothic horror craze. Grosse’s Genius takes a prominent place here although neither Grosse nor the German title of the Gothic novel are mentioned. When Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe chat about their reading pleasures and horrors in chapter 6 of Northanger Abbey, they itemize the most fashionable tales of terror around 1800. One of their preferred novels is a book titled Horrid Mysteries, which scholars considered to be of dubious origin or even to be a fake for quite some time (Austen 33; cf. Thomson and Frank). This book was finally identified as Peter Will’s translation of Grosse’s Der Genius and was reprinted in the twentieth century along with the other so-called Northanger novels. Will’s translation, Horrid Mysteries, was published in London in 1796, only two years after the fourth volume of the German original appeared. Another even more thoroughly forgotten translation retained the German title The Genius and also appeared in 1796.

The ubiquitous Peter Will was a London pastor of German origin (Hamberger and Meusel 533), who «made something of a career out of translating German sensational novels into English» (Clery and Miles 250). «Translating» may be a much too narrow description for what Will did with the German texts. He altered the style and sometimes also the structure of the novel in order to meet the expectations of the English audience. Will’s translations or transformations thus provide a significant example of the complex process of cultural transfer of Gothic literature from Germany to England, a process that does not lack in misappropriations and misreadings. Barry Murnane rightly points out that Austen’s «parody of Gothic novels» is «by no means an isolated reaction» («Importing Home-grown Horrors?» 54, 81).

These complex processes of Gothic cultural transfer include translations, adaptations, enrichment, rejection, and (veiled or open) references from
the German-speaking countries to Great Britain and from Great Britain to Germany. These various processes should be the focus of a comprehensive research project that abstains from older models of influence and instead uses methodological premises – such as the concept of «transfer culturel»3 – which enable researchers to work with the multi-polar levels of mutual transformation. Such a research project could be based on Murnane’s argument that there are two core tendencies in German and British Gothic literature leading to the fact that texts were altered in order to fit the taste of each respective audience («Uncanny Translations»). Edgar Allen Poe’s famous assertion, «I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul» (129), establishes a dichotomy whose one pole is that which was considered a specific «German» tradition of Gothic, mainly consisting of simple effects of horror, and the other a psychological tradition of the Gothic. This distinction, however, erases the contributions of the German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, who was one of the most remarkable sources for Poe, as well as the «black» side of German Romanticism, which also contributed abundantly to Poe’s work.

I argue in this article that both the British and the German tradition of Gothic literature around 1800 and its various cultural transfers – as different as they appear and as different as they present themselves – are based upon a common ground resulting from yet another cultural transfer. This common ground is «Anthropologie» or «the science of man» as it was developed and discussed throughout the eighteenth century in the European-wide process of Enlightenment. Alexander Pope’s claim «Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;/The proper study of mankind is Man» (38) was adapted and altered often in Germany and France by writers ranging from Christoph Martin Wieland, Albrecht von Haller, and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg to the «Anti-Pope» Johann Georg Schlosser (Wieland 172; Haller 135; Schlosser). Denis Diderot’s multi-polar model of anthropologic knowledge in his Encyclopédie and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s rendering of aesthetics as the «Scientia sensitive cognoscendi et proponendi» (Baumgarten 16) helped form the discourse regarding the study of human beings. The «Anthropologists» do not simply aim at scientific explanations for human phenomena. Georg Friedrich Meier, in his Philosophische Sittenlehre of 1754, considers not only several academic disciplines to be «anthropologisch,» but also «Wahrheiten,» «Künste,» and «Dinge» (truths, arts, and objects), in so far as they contribute considerably to the knowledge of human beings (Meier par. 398, 368). Inside and outside universities and academies, «philosophes,» «Popularphilosophen,» and literary authors were looking for answers to anthropological questions within this broader understanding. This anthropological discourse
became crucial for the development of literature in the late eighteenth century and, as I will argue, also provides important presuppositions for the genesis of the genre «Gothic novel.»

I do not aim at ahistorical or typological explanations for the uncanny or for its boom around 1800. The uncanny – Todorov uses the more neutral concept of *étrange* – is seen here as one of many elements that produce the instability of the Gothic narrated world. I propose that the history of a literary genre should also be written as the history of its presuppositions. Grosse’s *Der Genius* exemplifies how contextual factors, in addition to aesthetic issues, co-determine what was considered a Gothic novel both in Great Britain and in Germany. Gothic novels both of British and of German origin were created within the context of the anthropologically determined self-enlightenment of the Enlightenment. Although Grosse’s aesthetic theory, as Carsten Zelle has shown, differs distinctively from the Enlightenment theory of the sublime (67), the novel follows, with regard to the practices of cognition which have become problematic, the same ideas that inform the self-reflexivity of the Enlightenment. A core aspect of the European Enlightenment in the last third of the eighteenth century was the belief that the means to achieve progress towards a state of being enlightened are restricted due to the unavoidable limits human beings encounter when trying to perceive, to judge, and to reason. The Enlightenment can serve to enlighten only within the parameters of what human beings are able to achieve. Thus, the development of the Gothic novel genre cannot be explained exclusively as some immanent need for metaphysics in times of secularization nor can it be seen merely as an antienlightenment program of esotericism. One of the main factors that form the basis of this genre is an anthropology-based perception of contingency that itself is disseminated through cultural transfer and transformation. These processes of cultural and intertextual transfer and transformation stipulate the multi-polar semantic superimposition of various layers in the textual form and in the narratives. They follow the rules of formation posited by several national and transnational discourses. Cultural transfer means the transfer of ideas, cultural facts, practices, and institutions from a specific system of social, behavioral, performance, and representational patterns into another system in the course of which background, motives, selective criteria, and purposes change.

I will focus on a small range of these processes of cultural transfer, in particular on the relevance of «anthropological» thinking for Grosse’s novel and Grosse’s reception of the writings of the British philosopher James Beattie. While still a student in Göttingen and Halle, Grosse began to translate Beattie’s texts into German and to edit, at the same time, an anthropological journal, the *Magazin für die Naturgeschichte des Menschen*, which has been
disregarded by scholars until now. The contributors to the Magazin discuss numerous anthropological subjects. The preface of the first issue of the Magazin mentions a wide realm of areas of knowledge, including «die eigentliche Naturgeschichte des Menschen,» «Anatomie, Physiologie, Physik und einige Capitel aus seiner Psychologie.» The contributors deal with the question of dreams and the genesis of ideas in the human mind; they provide biographical sketches and illness studies; they contribute to the debate on human races and how to determine them; they write about language and the human ability to speak; they discuss the relevance of fossil findings; they explore how the human iris is physiologically constituted; and they discuss questions regarding the history of mankind. Grosse also includes a review of Johann Daniel Metzger’s influential *Medizinisch-philosophische Anthropologie für Aerzte und Nichtärzte* (1790). In addition, the volumes of this journal are dedicated to two of Grosse’s prominent teachers: Johann Friedrich Blumenbach from Göttingen and Johann Reinhold Forster from Halle. Grosse contributed to the journal and, beginning with the second issue of the first volume, he served as its main editor. He included in the Magazin several of his own translations of James Beattie’s *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, above all the crucial essay on dreaming. A seemingly minor detail perfectly demonstrates that these translations are subject to a process of cultural transfer, not only of adaptation. In the preface to his edition of Beattie’s dissertations, Grosse explicitly criticizes Beattie for not including metaphysics in his system (Beattie, *Moralische und Kritische Abhandlungen*, Preface, vol.1) – a clear hint that Grosse’s cultural context is not identical with the British empiricist tradition (and its critics), but is part of the German Enlightenment tradition that rarely exists without a metaphysical layer.

If we take these processes of alteration seriously, we must assume that it is not Beattie who has an impact on Grosse’s Gothic novel *Der Genius*, but it is Grosse’s reading and translation of Beattie; just as it is not Grosse who is mentioned in Austen, but Peter Will’s reading and translation of Grosse. By means of his intense studies of Beattie, Grosse got to know English-Scottish empiricism in detail through the eyes of a distinct critic. We may suppose that it was first and foremost the rehabilitation of the senses (against a presumed dominance of reason alone) that attracted the young student to Beattie’s theories. But Grosse probably also found a connection between Beattie and the developing «Gothic» tradition in England and Scotland which had been fostered by Macpherson’s influential «Ossian» poems as well as the ensuing debates and literary experiments. Between 1770 and 1774 Beattie had written a poem that was widely read, commented on, and used as a source in the English and Scottish Gothic tradition, for example by Ann Radcliffe. This poem, titled
«The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius,» follows Ossian’s footsteps and develops the theme of the «unfolding of poetic genius» by providing a nature-bound, heroic, Scottish character. There is no evidence available to determine whether Grosse knew this poem in written form or whether the title of this poem was the source for the title of his Gothic novel. In any case, Grosse’s excellent knowledge of Beattie contributed to a specific anthropological discourse that played a significant role in the cultural context of Grosse’s writing.

Grosse had an outstanding knowledge of contemporary debates, a knowledge that was fueled by his close connections to the university landscape in Göttingen and Halle, connections which included his falling in love with the youngest daughter of the highly renowned Göttingen professor Johann David Michaelis (Dammann 727–28). Contributors to the journal include his Göttingen companion Philipp Michaelis, but also Blumenbach and Metzger, renowned participants in the anthropologic discourse of the era. Grosse’s excellent knowledge of anthropological arguments will be seen to be reflected in his novel.

Anthropological arguments form a distinctive aspect of the Enlightenment; they do not contradict it. Eighteenth-century anthropology aims to enlighten human beings about human beings. A specific consequence of anthropology-based thinking forms one of the core tenets of late eighteenth-century discourse: «Anthropologen» of the late eighteenth century argue that specific areas of human cognition can produce only contingent knowledge. The limits of human cognition and understanding were described by Meier, philosophically analyzed by Kant, and discussed by many others. These are areas of insecure knowledge or of nonknowledge. Discourses regarding flaws in knowledge and the contingent nature of knowledge gain a distinctive presence in the late eighteenth century (Adler and Godel). One may here consider Niklas Luhmann’s argument that it is precisely the attempt to enforce order and rationality that produces the perception of contingency (48). Essentially, the perception of contingency in the late Enlightenment is based on four discourses (Godel, Vorurteil 69ff.; Garber and Thoma).

The first discourse involves anthropologists of the late eighteenth century who were of the opinion that dark, sensual cognition (including emotion) cannot be completely controlled. They identified as the core issue the mutual influence of body and mind. Moreover, the «lower» forces of cognition had been equated with the «upper» forces since Meier and Baumgarten. In Grosse’s translation, Beattie argues in the preface to his dissertations that «Gedächtniß, Einbildungskraft, Vernunft, Verstand, Bewußtseyn sind eben so gut Kräfte der menschlichen Seele, als Gehör, Gesicht, Gefühl, Geruch und Geschmack» (Moralische und Kritische Abhandlungen 1: 7).
The second discourse focuses on empirical methods. These methods not only lead to the hoped-for increase in knowledge, but also put into question evaluations of knowledge, cognition, and certainty. Because of the limits of empirical observation, only preliminary remarks in certain areas can be made, especially in areas where experiments are impossible: «von einem solchen Gegenstande, über den nie irgend ein Versuch genau angestellt werden kann, […] können unsere Kenntnisse sich nie höher, als zu Wahrscheinlichkeiten erheben» (Beattie, «Über das Träumen» 39, trans. Grosse). Thus we see that dreaming – something every human being does, something that is fundamentally ‘human’ – is one of those areas where a complete, rational knowledge is not possible. Yet one cannot dispense with empirical cognition. Another similar area is the question of whether or not it is possible to recognize other people’s character completely. Many writers of the late eighteenth century, including Carl Friedrich Bahrdt who lectured in Halle when Grosse was a student there, argue that it is impossible to recognize people’s motives behind their behavior because these are «completely invisible» (Bahrdt 107f.; Berg 378). Empirical judgments about other people’s character must remain tentative.

The third discourse focuses on anthropologists who place human beings within the scope of a natural world that human beings can hardly survey: «Die Natur thut nichts umsonst, aber die Unvollkommenheit unsers Verstandes macht uns oft die Endursachen mißkennen» (Beattie, «Über das Träumen» 35, trans. Grosse). Nature cannot be completely measured and understood because it provides a complex whole of multiple influences and because human beings are always bound to one vantage point.

The fourth and final discourse focuses on the issue of whether or not achieving knowledge is a process determined – or at least impacted – by history and culture. Grosse writes in the Magazin:

Der rasche Strom der Zeiten hat alle Steine über einander gewälzt, wodurch man Abschnitte im Laufe der Aufklärungen ehemals wohl zu bezeichnen gedachte […] nur ihr itziger uns sichtbarer Gang hat allenfalls der Phantasie eine Richtschnur gezogen. (Grosse, «Was ist Geschichte» 3)

Even the wisest historians would be able only to venture «kraftlose Versuche, in die Oberfläche zu graben» (3).

In the end, many consider the ways of achieving practical knowledge and the availability of knowledge contingent. Contingency is a factor in cognition. The question is then how to deal with this experience of contingency? Grosse argues that the task is to find ways out of «dem trüben Uebergange von Wahrheit zu Wahrscheinlichkeit und wahrscheinlicher Dichtung» (8). For perceiving contingency does not mean that human beings need to perse-
vere in the lack of reliable judgments; it does not mean that enlightened optimism has to be turned upside down or turned towards fatalism. Whereas academic philosophers such as Kant strive for new epistemological models, their contemporaries react to the same experience with three options:

1. Some aim to radicalize the receptive side of Enlightenment processes by stressing the individual’s responsibility for enlightenment despite all contingency. The basis for this attempt is the idea that there is a «common sense» or «allgemeine Menschenvernunft,» which is distributed among all human beings (Hinske xviii). Contingency is supposed to be replaced by a rationally guided process of Enlightenment ready to deal with the fact that reason does not suffice and is subject to irrational impulses. Alas, this first answer trusts in the capacity of the individual to enlighten himself or herself. This concept runs the risk of falling into aporias when it comes to the question of how individual reason and individual cognition may be transferred (Thomé 388).

2. Other thinkers aim to establish general norms for cognition. If the masses were not able to achieve truth, then truth, especially moral principles, must be prescribed by philosophy, religion, and politics. This argument, correcting skeptical anthropological thinking, was developed by Beattie and many others. In «An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth» (1776), Beattie restricts himself to the «moral science» as he cannot explore the human mind (x). He does not aim to produce a system of logic: «A complete theory of evidence is not to be expected in this book» (x). However, he knows about the importance and the inevitability of the «science of human nature,» i.e., the same complex of knowledge that is named «Anthropologie» in German, and he proposes an empirical method for this area (10), which argues with David Hume’s skeptical-empiricist anthropology. Beattie’s research examining the human heart is led by «sagacity,» «sensibility,» «delicacy,» and by his claim to write in a popular way (12). Beattie acknowledges that truth is based upon subjective perception processes: «I account That to be truth (sic) which the constitution of our nature determines us to believe» (19). He opens the realm of inter-subjective concepts of truth by introducing «common sense» as the «energy of understanding» or «self-evident truth» (21, 27). Although Beattie uses the central concept of the Scottish School here, he explicitly demarcates his position against their supposed skepticism (Kühn). Beattie’s common sense enables human beings to recognize those truths that are immediately clear and therefore cannot be the object of doubt – such as the truth of moral laws. For Beattie, common sense is even more important than reason: «common sense is the ultimate judge of truth, to which reason must continually act in subordination» (Beattie, «Essay on the Nature» 31). Beattie attempts to combine the belief in human rationality, truth, virtue, and Christianity with
the anthropology-based limits of human understanding in a conservative manner by insisting on the existence and the perceptibility of an irrefutable moral truth. Reinstitutionalizing morality cannot undo the corollaries of the anthropological discourse, but rather aims at suspending them by some kind of intuitive perception of truth named «common sense.»

3. Several eighteenth-century writers do not agree with these conservative attempts to reduce the problem of contingency to moral norms. These writers radicalize the production of ambivalence by means of complex writing strategies. Literary anthropology transforms the problems of dealing with the perception of contingency. Hans Richard Brittnacher rightly argues that the fear felt by those who despair when facing the complexity and contingency of reality is one of the basic assumptions underlying the production of the uncanny (7f.). As soon as this despair is threatening, the uncanny becomes the hyperbole of a confrontation with contingency. The uncanny connects the limits of human understanding with presuppositions such as those which assume a reality behind the perceived objects. The literary culture of the uncanny exaggerates a world perception, but it does not represent it mimetically. The Gothic novel shows the literary performance of a discursive perception of contingency (Godel, «Anthropologiebasierte Kontingenz»).

As we have seen, Grosse was perfectly acquainted with the contemporary debates on anthropology and its consequences. But his translation of Beattie’s texts also provided stimulation for his novel Der Genius. Impulses for literary motifs came from Beattie’s essays «Ueber Gedächtniß und Einbildungskraft» and «Ueber die Fabel und den Roman,» both published in the Dissertations, moral and critical, and both translated by Grosse in the late 1780s. In the first essay, Beattie explains how imagination works and how imagination is able to produce defective perceptions. Imagination can produce associations by means of attributing observed effects to causes that can be only guessed at. Superstition and prejudice emerge from charging effects with supposed meanings without a reason (Beattie, Moralische und kritische Abhandlungen 1: 167f.). Human beings are, according to Beattie, especially susceptible to this kind of precipitate judgment when their senses are unable to distinguish clearly: «Dunkelheit und Gefühl der Einsamkeit erzeugen in jeder Seele etwas von Angstlichkeit, und wo das Auge die Gegenstände um uns in keinem bestimmten Gepräge zeichnet, sind wir immer mehreren Gefahren ausgesetzt, als wenn alle unsere Fähigkeiten in ungebundener Freyheit wirken» (170).

Although there is no reason to be afraid in the dark, one’s power of imagination signals that there are dangers which one is unable to perceive. Our imagination is inclined to actively send such signals when the sense of sight is
restricted in darkness. Ideas of «Gespenstern, Geistern und anderen schrecklichen Dingen» are, according to Beattie in Grosse’s translation, due to such absurd connections of ideas (171). The soul falls prey to its own thoughts, «die Einbildungskraft zerreißt ihre Zügel,» and now, the softest sound frightens us, the most common object «erscheine dem Auge verworren,» one believes «Gesichte (sic) zu sehen und Leute zu hören, die nur in unserer Einbildung Wirklichkeit haben» (172–73). In order to illustrate his argument, Beattie here specifies an almost complete repertoire of sensory objects and perceptions that may produce the described effects of the imagination: wide, unoccupied, church-like buildings, howling winds, the clapping of doors and windows, the creaking of rusty hinges, moldering walls, unexpected gleams of the moon, the forsaken apartments of an old castle, the uproar of rats and bats, piles of ruins that may shelter owls, deep groves, the crashing of branches and many more (173ff.). What Grosse finds in Beattie’s text is an inventory for a capital Gothic novel, along with a psychological explanation as to why these effects have an enormous impact on human beings.

However, this is not the only context Beattie gives to these observations. In his essay «On Fable and Romance,» translated by Grosse under the title of «Ueber die Fabel und den Roman,» Beattie explicitly historicizes his argument by describing the effects of imagination as something peculiar to the Gothic era he is aiming to reconstruct. He writes about the «Gothic» behavior of medieval knights: «Their passion for strange adventures is another trait in the character of the knights of chivalry. The world was then little known, and men […] were ignorant and credulous» (540–41). Ignorance is linked to Gothic apparitions:

Strange sights were expected in strange countries; dragons to be destroyed, giants to be humbled, and enchanted castles to be overthrown. […] The castles […], reared in a rude but grand style of architecture; full of dark and winding passages, of secret apartments, of long uninhabited galleries, and of chambers supposed to be haunted with spirits; and undermined by subterraneous labyrinths as places of retreat in extreme danger; the howling of winds through the crevices of old walls, and other dreary vacuities; […] the shrieking of bats, and the screaming of owls, and other creatures, that resort to desolate or half-inhabited buildings – these, and the like circumstances, in the domestic life of the people I speak of, would multiply their superstitions and increase their credulity. (541)

Superstition and prejudices arise from the lack of knowledge (not the lack of reason); they serve as a «natural» support in order to enable the medieval knights to explain their world. Both arguments – the historical and the anthropological way of explaining imaginings, superstition, and prejudices – were already well-known to German readers. In «Journal meiner Reise,» Jo-
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Hann Gottfried Herder argued that sailors incline to overinterpretation and mythical exaggeration of a single data point of perception since they need to be aware of the slightest, possibly fatal, signal (22f.). Myths and prejudices emerge from the connection between the human addiction to poetic imagination and to the marvelous (25). Herder’s elaboration of this hypothesis, following David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, is another example for the multi-polar process of cultural transfer during the eighteenth century. Hume can be considered the source both for Herder and Beattie.

These sources, alongside Beattie’s psychological explanation of how and why imagination is able to produce apparitions that are not reality-based, provided Grosse with everything he needed to write a Gothic novel of his own. He could use the descriptions of psychological processes to attempt to produce affects in his readers and could use some elements of Beattie’s inventory of Gothic motifs. However, we should keep in clear focus the basic difference between Grosse’s novel and Beattie’s texts: whereas Beattie aims to explain Gothic apparitions by historicizing and psychologically analyzing them, Grosse uses them in order to write a literary work.

*Aus den Papieren des Marquis C von G*, the subtitle of Grosse’s *Genius*, already indicates that Grosse is playing with truth by means of feigning an editor, which was a technique often used in contemporaneous literature (Wirth). Starting with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the assertion that the narration was based upon found manuscripts had become a core topos of the Gothic. «Reine strenge Wahrheit wird meine Feder leiten,” says Graf von O. in Friedrich Schiller’s «Geisterseher,” a story that is also ostensibly taken from historical documents (45). Grosse himself maintains in the *Magazin für die Naturgeschichte des Menschen* that objectivity and subjectivity can, under specific circumstances, jointly find the truth: on «idea-walks» into the area of natural philosophy, a new kind of objectivity may emerge which is based upon a subjective «Bestimmungsgrund» («Ideen» 161). One may see a contrast between literary claims for truth and the presence of ignorance and contingency in the novels of the era. Along with the claim for truth in the subtitle, Grosse’s novel asserts that the characters of the novel depend on something impenetrable. The first-person narrator Karlos relates the «Verwicklung von Zufällen» he believes to observe to an «unsichtbare Hand» (7). This motif is another example of a specific kind of cultural transfer: Grosse also translated Adam Smith, who popularized the symbol of the unseen hand that directs the autonomous functioning of free markets. Karlos is convinced that a secret society is attempting to influence him. But he can never explain how this secret society acts. He tries in vain to reconstruct the causal relations among the things happening to him (59); he tries in vain to find out about the hidden plan.
to which all apparitions seem to point (87). Occurrences remain unexplained and unexplainable: when and why something occurs seems contingent. Karlos always needs to doubt the «Wahrscheinlichkeit» (166) of the incidents. «Alles hing ja so sichtbar zusammen» (219), but nevertheless, even attempts to explain the meaning of the connections Karlos believes to have recognized are due only to «Zufälle[n]» (367 et passim). He experiences contingency, and he constantly strives to solve the conundrums it produces.

But why do the novel’s characters always fail when they try to enlighten the uncanny? First and foremost, they are deceived by their senses. All the narrators in this novel report on their sensual and bodily reactions towards their respective perceptions, and their descriptions always result in the insight that the senses do not provide certain knowledge. All the crucial action takes place at night – the characters can hardly see anything. Being dependent on their hearing, they experience that they cannot attach the noises and sounds to any cause and thus they cannot explain them (25, 44 et passim). The sense of touch replaces seeing and hearing, but it does not provide explanations; what results is merely the renewed experience that something unexpected has been felt: coldness, heat, intangible objects (26). The sense of smell cannot contribute to clarity either. All senses – even when combined – do not suffice to explain what happens to Karlos and to the other characters in this novel. A clear, distinct, and evident cognition – the ideal of enlightened knowledge since Descartes – is impossible, as can be seen in the apparition of the «Genius» Amanuel. Almost all of the senses are involved here. Glaring light comes from an unknown source; Karlos notices streams of sparks, a slight noise, whispering, groaning from some un-identifiable person or animal; a «feiner Duft» gushes out of the objects, getting thicker and then gaining a form that cannot be seized (168f.). His reason and his senses fail him when he attempts to clarify his perceptions. Imagination takes the place of the disabled senses. The complete dissolution of certain, sensual perception leads to the complete failure of reason: «alle Gedanken schwammen in einer zweifelhaften Berauschung» (105). The senses do not achieve the hoped-for clarity and thus an exalted imagination takes their place, finally releasing all desires out of control. Karlos becomes addicted to the senses and to sensuality.

What can we do when all the senses fail and when they, assisted by an exalted imagination, drag reason down? Beattie recommends the «Geist freyer Untersuchung,» reminding us to think reasonably and to act resolutely (Moralsche und kritische Abhandlungen 1: 175, 177). But in Grosse’s novel, reason is not in a position to find the causes of the uncanny occurrences. When Karlos tries to keep calm, the bell cord tears apart when he attempts to call for help. When he tries to rationalize associations, «kalte Schlüsse der Vernunft
zu ziehen» (80), he follows Beattie’s recommendation to «reason away» superstitious exaltations of imagination (*Moralische und kritische Abhandlungen* 1: 171). Beattie, however, also knows the limits of this method: if one is convinced by the evidence of the existence of an apparition, then no argument can change this opinion («Essay on the Nature» 42). The failure of the senses and of reason leads Karlos to formulate a diagnosis that posits the idea of an exalted imagination in an almost Fichtean metaphor: «Unsere Existenzen war selbst ein Phantom» (541).

Imagination plays a key role in constructing the contingent realm of experience: «meine Phantasie durchlief eine Reihe von Wahrscheinlichkeiten» (56). The overexcited imagination causes uncanny visions. According to Beattie, the productive imagination, which is not based upon reality, transforms «Gedanken in neue Gestalten» (*Moralische und kritische Abhandlungen* 1: 138). The secret society in Grosse’s *Genius* obviously seeks to use Beattie’s diagnosis that imagination can be manipulated especially when «die Seele sich in einer unruhigen Bewegung fühlt» (160). The danger for Karlos consists in the possibility that an overexcited imagination produces a contingency that can no longer be ordered by means of reason. In the end, Karlos does not expect to be able to achieve any certain knowledge: «Eine Dunstgestalt Deiner Phantasie wirst Du erhaschen, wenn Du ihnen am nahesten zu seyn gedenkst» (205). Imagination without empirical experience cannot connect ideas with each other in a meaningful way (362).

The crisis of the senses, of reason, and of a reasonable imagination does not allow the characters in the novel to rely on either intersubjective or objective cognition. Although they often claim to have empirical certainty, these assertions are repeatedly disproven. A lady maintains that «die Wirklichkeit» and her «Erfahrung» prove that ghosts are real (226), but the presumed apparition turns out to be a young man whom Karlos unmasks as a rival and stabs in a duel at night. What was supposed to be empirical evidence offered by the lady turns out to be an attempted deception. Again and again minimal progress nourishes Karlos’s hopes to finally find the truth. Karlos believes that «Hier konnte sich vieles, […] aufklären» (232). Enlightenment is, however, long in coming.

As empirical evidence reaches its limits, the true disposition of most of the characters remains unclear: «Wir alle sehen uns so gleich, und es sind mehr Zufälle als Anstrengungen, welche einen einzelnen aus der Masse herausheben» (571). The contingent relationship between inward and outward appearance does not allow for reliable accounts. «Trüglichkeit des menschlichen Außeren» (372) relentlessly occupies the characters in the novel. Even language is no certain means in order to achieve true knowledge. When Kar-
los is being introduced into the secret society, he hears words, «von denen ich gar nichts begriff» (104; also Brittnacher 68ff.). He never knows how to interpret this language. Elmire, in her confession of love to the protagonist, maintains at first that she loves someone else (72). This behavior may be coquetry, but in Karlös’s thoughts, it raises the question whether he can trust language in general. In addition, simulatio and dissimulatio obstruct character cognition. In opposition to contemporary bourgeois claims, the members of the nobility constantly and inscrutably dissimulate: «Wer enträthelt aber des Herzens seltsamen (sic) Irrgänge!» (219). Character is merely a construction. Caroline, another woman to whom Karlos is attracted, is described as follows: «Sie war der Widerschein aller Gedanken, die man gegen sie äußerte, und die sie verstand; ein jeder sah in ihr sein eigenes Bild» (398). Caroline turns out to be one of the forerunners of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Olimpia.

The appearance of nature contributes to the rising confusion of the characters. The path, «ein regelmäßiger Schlangenweg» (106) which the protagonists follow, leads through darkness and through labyrinths. The landscape Karlos reenters after his first encounter with the secret society is depicted as «etwas verwildert» (120), following the pattern of an English landscape garden in which nature seemingly has replaced visible art and in which emotional trepidation has replaced the rational order. The representations of nature in Grosse’s Genius comply with contemporary avant-garde patterns of garden theory and practice, as Harald Tausch has shown in his distinguished book (195ff.). Nature does not allow orientation; it accounts for its opposite. The crucial mode of perception in nature is nonknowledge: «Ungekannt trägt die Natur im geheimen Busen ihres Innern die schönsten Zauber ihrer Schöpfungen» (104).

Moreover, certain knowledge seems impossible because judgments are subject to historical changes. Not only the emotional status of the characters, but also their judgments change: «Es giebt Zeitpunkte im menschlichen Leben, wo die Gedanken mit einer reissenden Eile vor der Seele vorüberflattern» (543). This passage is once again closely related to Beattie’s arguments in that the Scottish philosopher maintains that there is a remarkably fast transfer of ideas and the judgments based upon them (Moralische und kritische Abhandlungen 1: 149ff.). Memory and imagination coincide; a true and stable judgment is hard to find and even harder to keep.

What can be done in the light of these experiences of contingency that terrify Karlos? The novel presents two attempts «Wahrscheinlichkeiten zu vergewissern» (90). The first one is – not surprisingly – to enter a society. «Das Gefühl in einer Verbindung zu stehen» (86) is said to calm the knowl-
edgeseeker. The secret society of the novel promises to distribute the «schöne Licht der Wahrheit» (102); it promises to reach a status that is «ganz, ganz unabhängig, nie berührt mehr von einem Gefühle der Bedürfnisse, von einem Streich der Umstände, von einem Hauche des Zufalls» (118). This solution is exactly what Beattie advises his readers to do: in order to cure one’s exalted imagination, one must seek the company of more intelligent people. If one does not do this, there is not much hope for healing («Ueber Gedächtniß und Einbildungskraft» 379). The punch line in the novel is that the secret society aims to take advantage of Beattie’s promise. After the members of the society have inflamed Karlos’s imagination and after they have confronted him with many inexplicable coincidences, it is the secret society that recommends to Karlos that it itself is the only effective remedy. Members of the secret society pretend to be purpose-oriented, rational representatives of the Enlightenment, and they claim that they are able to give shelter against contingency and all kinds of imponderables: «Nein, Don Karlos, es ist uns um Wahrheit zu tun» (102). However, the candidate has to fulfill several conditions: he must be open, he must not dissimulate, he is supposed to not wear a «Maske» (102). One could argue that even the secret society has no solution for the issue of recognizing other people’s characters – otherwise, there would be no need to demand openness.

Karlos is taught the rule that he must never doubt, but instead trust the conclusions of the society. He has to obey the directives they give him and to play his role (115). Jakob, a member of the society, reinforces these demands: «Nicht immer wirst du uns verstehen, Karlos; aber darum zweifle niemals und gehorche willig. [...] Sey immer gehorsam. [...] Sey immer offen gegen uns» (137). Thus, the secret society interdicts enlightened «Mündigkeit» and enlightened self-thinking by claiming that truth has already been found and that the secret society guides the ignorant towards the right path. The individual turns out to be the tool of a corporation that supposedly turns the Enlightenment ideal of human progress towards perfection into reality by steering this process (Dammann 801). An enlightened elite observes and punishes individuals.

However, for a considerable amount of time in this novel, Karlos sticks to a different version of the Enlightenment. He hovers between the emancipated use of his own reason and reliance on the society’s guidelines: «Ver- nunftschlüsse wechselten mit vorgeblichen Ahndungen in meiner Seele, und immer der letzte von ihnen schien Recht zu haben» (212). But all of Karlos’s attempts to bring the truth to light do not produce any enduring success, in part because the society knows how to frustrate them. In the end, the question remains open whether the promises the secret society makes really pro-
vide a stable shelter against the experience of contingency or not. Are they in the position to satisfy the human desire for the pursuit of happiness?

Karlos discovers an alternative way to counter contingency when he meets a hermit whose introduction by the narrator may be read as the opposite of all the cognitive problems Karlos and the other characters are facing: «Ein Blick, der in die Seele drang, ein Auge, das kein Schein betrügt, der stille Ernst der Mienen, aller Leidenschaften Ausdruck in einem gleichen Flusse aufgelöst» (268). The hermit teaches Karlos how to control his imagination, to persevere in his passions, to gain experiences on his own, and to treat the knowledge achieved differentially with respect to its purposes and perspectives. The hermit also teaches him that striving for honor is morally legitimized, and that merely satisfying sexual desires is not. Knowledge must – as the hermit maintains – not only relate to empirical cognition, it must be guided through the sublime and the beautiful (771; Hartmann). Karlos finally gains the insight that his previous way of dealing with experience was not guided by methodological principles: «Alle Erfahrungen, die ich auflas, sind nur Kinder des Zufalls und der Nothwendigkeit; das Studium hat sie noch zu nichts Ganzem vereinigt» (288). But now he is convinced that he has the ability to confront chance: «der Zufall hatte sein Schreckliches für mich verlohren, weil ich ihn für mich gewinnen lernte, und bald sah ich die Welt als ein Spiel um eine Kleinigkeit an» (290). Tolerance of contingency here is based upon a methodologically guided cognition that aims at practical behavioral standards.

After the hermit’s death, Karlos goes out into the wide world, feeling that he is armed with the epistemological inventory he needs. Although he cannot explain some new constellations he encounters, this does not make him uneasy initially since he has gained a good portion of stoicism to help him deal with contingencies (308f.). Together with some new friends he creates a social circle. However, inexplicable things begin to happen. The circle’s finances deteriorate, the genius Amanuel appears once more, and, contrary to every reasonable expectation, Karlos meets Elmire again whom he had seen dying. Karlos tries to follow the hermit’s advice to rationalize the events (we are reminded of Beattie’s identical suggestion): Karlos tries to reveal the genius’s apparition as natural magic or as «Mummerey für Kinder,» and to explain it through the «Einfluß einer gespannten, überströmenden, außer sich gesetzten Einbildungskraft» (386). In this manner, some apparitions in the novel are uncovered as a mere swindle (412ff.). These events support my argument that it is not the ghosts that make the uncanny in this novel, it is the psychological effects of the contingency. Karlos asks, «Gehen die Begebenheiten der Menschen in der That einer vorgezogenen Linie nach, oder reihet zuweilen auch der Zufall seltsam verbundene Umstände aneinander?» (504). More and more
often the characters speak of the «Zufall» – chance and fortunes that even the secret society cannot avoid (633, 645 et passim). Alfonso, the society’s representative, turns out to be Karlos’s uncle and his well-meaning «Genius.» In the hour of Alfonso’s death, he informs Karlos, «Ich blieb Herr der Umstände, aber ich vermag nichts über den Zufall. Das Ohngefähr rechne ich mir nicht zu» (547). At the end of part three of the novel there is the insight that judgments are only probable (552) and that truth is unutterable: «die kühnsten Hoffnungen von der Wirklichkeit zum Schweigen gebracht» (584). Karlos is introduced into the secret society.

The first-person narrators of the diverging narrative layers (above all, Karlos, Graf von S**, Jakob, and Elmire) contribute to the reader’s inability to find a nonambiguous truth. They arrange multiple variations of diegetic levels that surprise the recipient, thus making it impossible to reconstruct the relations behind the plot. The narrators could be called «unreliable.» 

They retain an internal focalization. They do not tell more than they can see. While the novel has a tendency to the «explained-supernatural» (Brittnacher 15) – Grosse is here once more in line with Beattie – several questions are left unanswered. Neither the narrators nor the readers can ever exactly identify who is a member of the secret society or who plays which role at any particular moment.

In contrast with the «Turmgesellschaft» in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, the true purposes of the secret society in Grosse will not be explained until the end of the novel. Alfonso even reports on dissonances within the society that further complicate Karlos’s attempts to see through the society’s intentions (Genius 547f.). Thus, Karlos’s judgments about the society change. They are determined by the limits of his knowledge and by the historical changes within the society. The secret society is not a stable, but rather a dynamic association of people who constantly change their intentions, purposes, and means (Dammann 802f.).

In the preface of part four of the novel, the narrator-author maintains that the novel resembles a conundrum. He says that he did not intend to substitute «Unbegreiflichkeit für Unbegreiflichkeit […]», ohne meinen Lesern weiter die mindeste Mühe zu lassen, ähnliche Dinge zu vergleichen, – und in dieser Ähnlichkeit den Schlüssel zu finden» (538). I argue that Grosse’s Genius stages topoi such as the contemporary perception of contingency and its corollaries. Behind the «Verwicklungen von scheinbaren Zufällen» (8), behind the labyrinthine, confusing, enigmatic events of the novel, behind the unexplainable characters and the opaque structure of the secret society, behind the incertitude of (self-)perception, of interpretation and cognition, the novel stages the useless striving of the characters to deal with the multi-polar
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contingency of the «Zufälle [des] Lebens» (723) and their inability to proceed to an order of things, to recognize the «Faden», the «nemlichen Punkt», in which the «Begebenheiten Gefühlvoller Seelen» (723) consolidate. The novel represents a contemporary problem that can be traced back to the European discourse of nonknowledge.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Linda K. Worley, Heide Crawford, and Jeff Worley for their thorough revision of my text and for their thoughtful comments. However, if there are any mistakes or vagueness in the text, they are my fault.


3 See Espagne and Werner; Espagne; Lüsebrink. Most of the research on European Gothic literature, although producing mostly useful and indispensable results, uses a one-sided perspective as well as the older paradigm of one tradition «influencing» the other. Cf. Boening; Horner; Mortensen.

4 Parts of the following are based upon Godel, «Anthropologiebasierte Kontingenz.»

5 Regarding Grosse, see: Dammann; Althof; Bloch; Hartmann; Kornerup. Grosse has been mentioned recently by Andriopoulos, «Occult Conspiracies,» esp. 79ff.

6 Regarding «Anthropologie» of the eighteenth century, see: Godel, Vorurteil; Thoma; Garber and Thoma. The basis of this research was laid by Schings.

7 If one tries to explain the development of the genre «Gothic novel» out of esoteric traditions, as Zacharias-Langhans argues, one misses the literary form. On the relevance of secularization for the genre, see Brittnacher 28, 40, 50ff.

8 Regarding this definition of «cultural transfer,» see Lüsebrink, esp. 214.

9 I am using the adjective «anthropological» with reference to the eighteenth-century usage of the term whose meaning was not yet restricted to research on foreign cultures.

10 Beattie’s essay, entitled «Über das Träumen, von J.B.,» was printed in a German version for the first time in Grosse’s Magazin in 1788 (1.1:35–70) and then, with some minor changes, in Beattie, Moralische und Kritische Abhandlungen, vol. 1. Althof was the first to point at Grosse’s translation of Beattie (Althof 206ff.).

11 In order to enable the readers to clearly distinguish between Beattie’s original text and Grosse’s translation, the quotes I give need to remain in their original language.

12 Beattie, «The Minstrel, » quote from the preface (84); the poem (85ff.).

13 Herder’s reading notes on Hume show the link (Irmscher 175). For more on Herder’s concept of prejudice, see Godel, Vorurteil 214ff.

14 Cf. Andriopoulos, «The Invisible Hand» on the dissemination of the motif in Smith, in economic theory, and in Gothic literature.

15 Regarding «unreliable narration, » see Nünning. Recent research does not relate «unreliability» with the concept of the implied author Booth had introduced (138ff.) as an instance of unreliable narration.


–. «The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius (1770–74).» Clery, Gothic Documents 84ff.


