

Resounding in the Human Body as the ‘True Sanskrit’ of Nature: Reading Sound Figures in Novalis’ *The Novices of Sais*

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Abstract: *The early German Romantics Novalis and Johann Wilhelm Ritter interpret Klangfiguren (“sound figures,” known most commonly as “Chladni Figures”), as pointing towards the scientific evidence of a universal language of nature, with sound containing its own writing—sound that can be seen, and writing that can be heard—a language that is therefore revealed with the human body as its instrument. This language, which Novalis calls the “true Sanskrit” of nature in his literary fragment *The Novices of Sais*, becomes Novalis’ and Ritter’s key to deciphering the knowledge of the self through an inner seeing and hearing.*

Keywords: *Klangfiguren, sound figures, Chladni figures, German Romanticism, Novalis, Die Lehrlinge zu Sais, The Novices of Sais, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, fragment, Sanskrit, nature, body.*

1. Introduction

Ulrich Gaier has called *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (*The Novices of Sais*, 1798/99) by Novalis (1772–1801) “perhaps the most complicated text in German literature.”¹ The abstract and philosophical discussions that ensue among the characters have left much confusion and debate over the meaning of the literary fragment, and to what or whom Novalis is referring in each passage.² Set in Sais, Egypt, an unnamed teacher leads a group of likewise nameless novices on a search for the lost universal language of nature. Interestingly, the Rosetta Stone was discovered by Napoleon’s team of explorers in 1799 in the town of Rashid, just months after Novalis stopped work on *The Novices of Sais*. It is believed to have been originally displayed in the temple of Sais, where Novalis’ story takes place—but Novalis’ novices are not looking at the hieroglyphs. Instead, Novalis writes in the beginning of “die wahre Sanskrit,” “the true Sanskrit”:

¹ As quoted in Hoffmann (1989, p.28) by the editor, Charlton.

² In her review of Ulrich Gaier’s book, *Krumme Regel*, Stopp (1973) explains, “After Jurij Striedter’s pioneering work, supplemented by Ulrich Gaier’s fuller analysis of *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, it would seem that Rudolf Haym’s judgment of this work as a confused, ‘noch völlig ungestattete Dichtung’ has been finally disposed of; however, this view is still valid for Professor Neubauer in his *Bifocal Vision*” (p. 459). Of Gaier’s seven-stage analysis of the literary fragment, Immerwahr (1972) writes, “All of these are difficult to follow, some are unconvincing in themselves, and some are incompatible with each other” (p. 743). The general incomprehensibility of Novalis’ story has therefore not only been in the narrative itself, but also in attempts to analyze it!

We do not understand the language, because the language does not understand itself, nor wishes to; the true Sanskrit would speak in order to speak, because speaking is its delight and essence. (Novalis, my translation and emphasis)

Man verstehe die Sprache nicht, weil sich die Sprache selber nicht verstehe, nicht verstehen wolle; die echte Sanskrit spräche, um zu sprechen, weil Sprechen ihre Lust und ihr Wesen sei. (Novalis, 1960, I, p. 79, my emphasis)³

That Novalis avoids the hieroglyphs and turns to Sanskrit as a basis for his novices' search for the lost universal language can perhaps be explained by the following passage in Friedrich Schlegel's (1772–1829) "Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier" (1808). In the context of his analysis of Sanskrit compared to other languages and specifically in the search for the origin of language, Schlegel discusses the "perfect grammar" of Sanskrit in contrast to the hieroglyphs. He emphasizes the experience of a "feines Gefühl" ("fine feeling") that comes with understanding the primordial meaning of nature through Sanskrit. Of this feeling he writes:

*This fine feeling then had to produce writing with the language itself at the same time; **no hieroglyphic painting or imaging after external objects of nature**, but one which now also depicts and denotes the inner character of the letters, as it is so distinctly felt, in visible outlines. (My translation and emphasis)⁴*

*Dießfeine Gefühl mußte dann mit der Sprache selbst zugleich auch Schrift hervorbringen; **keine hieroglyphische nach äußern Naturgegenständen mahlende oder bildende**, sondern eine solche, welche den innern Charakter der Buchstaben, wie er so deutlich gefühlt wird, nun auch in sichtlichen Umrissen hinstellte und bezeichnete. (Schlegel, 1846, p. 298, my emphasis)*

Unlike the hieroglyphs, which were created after external images of nature, Sanskrit, in its alphabet and sounds, represents the inner character of nature, which is sensed by a "fine feeling". Here, a brief history of Sanskrit is needed. Joshi (2016) writes:

Sanskrit is regarded as the ancient language of Hinduism, where it was used by the Hindu Celestial Gods, and then by the Indo-Aryans. (...) The Sanskrit language was termed as Deva-Vani ('Deva' Gods – 'Vani' language) as it was believed to have been generated by the god Brahma who passed it to the Rishis (sages) living in celestial abodes, who then communicated the same to their early disciples from where it spread on earth.

There are four types of Sanskrit that were written by the Rishis (sages, also known as "seers") between 1500 and 600 BCE—together they are called the Vedas. Morreall and Sonn (2012) explain,

The Vedas are traditionally ascribed to ancient 'seers,' called Rishis, who 'heard' or 'perceived' them. That is, the knowledge they convey is not thought to be 'revealed' in the way that Western scriptures are. Instead, the Rishis had extraordinary abilities to

3 Two volumes of Novalis' writings will be referenced in this article. Volume I, which contains the story *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (*The Novices of Sais*). Volume III, referenced later, contains his fragments from *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*The General Notebook*).

4 All future bolded text in quotations is my emphasis in order to highlight the most important language and phrases and keep them in context.

understand Reality, to 'see' it as it truly is, and to convey that information in language.
(p. 213)

The Rishis therefore both heard and saw this language (perhaps to be understood as an internal, synaesthetic experience, since others did not have access to it) and then transcribed it.⁵ The Sanskrit alphabet, which consists of 52 letters including 16 vowels and 36 consonants, is intimately connected to the physiology of creating sound—it is made out of every possible sound that the mouth can make—and pronunciation is extremely important for the accurate communication of the language.⁶ Panini, who lived around the 4th century BCE, is credited with writing “the only source of Sanskrit grammar and vocabulary today” in *Ashtadhyayi*, which “contains 3959 systematised rules that are undiluted in brevity, full of wonderful analysis, explanation, and preferential usage of the language and word formation” (Joshi, 2016). When Panini’s text was first published in 1810, Friedrich Schlegel’s analysis and first translation from Sanskrit into German was discredited. “Armed with Panini’s grammar, later 19th century linguists such as Bopp and Böhtlingk revised Schlegel’s theories on the nature of Sanskrit” (Figueira, 1989, p. 425).

The early German Romantics were fascinated with, and integrated aspects of, Hinduism, Buddhism, and ideas about India and Sanskrit into their writings to suit their own purposes. Cowan (2008) writes:

Among the early German Romantics, the four figures that would become most enthralled with ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts and medieval Sanskrit drama were Novalis, Schelling, and the two brothers Schlegel. The Indological groundwork laid by French and English scholars like Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, Pierre Sonnerat, William Jones, and Warren Hastings had been absorbed and elaborated upon by Kant, Herder, and Friedrich Majer in the German principalities, having a direct impact on the early Romantics. (p. 325)

The Schlegel brothers wrote articles for their quarterly, *Athenäum* (1798–1800), which Cowan (2008) states “reflected their enthusiastic support of the virtues of Sanskrit language and literature” (p. 327).⁷ Dauer (1965) writes, “Friedrich, in ‘Gespräch über die Poesie,’ argues that the treasures of South Asian literature should be as accessible as those of Greek and Roman antiquity, viewing India as the source of *Universalpoesie*,” which is the Schlegel brothers’ and Novalis’ project on creating an ideal, universal language. In Schlegel’s conception of *Universalpoesie*, he embraces the infinity in *becoming*—that the *Universalpoesie* will forever evolve and never be

5 The Rig Veda is considered the core text of the Vedas and is the oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text, the earliest chapters date from either between around 1500 and 1200 BCE or 1700 and 1100 BCE. It contains ten books known as mandalas (“circles”) written by Rishis. It was first translated into Latin in 1830 CE by Friedrich August Rosen, and was therefore not available to the early German Romantics. The last of the Vedas, the Upanishads, were written from approximately 800 BCE and 500 BCE, and were a reaction against the focus of religious life from “external rites and sacrifices” in the earlier Vedas and a turn toward “internal spiritual quests” (Violatti, 2014). The translation into Latin by Anquetil Duperron in 1801–1802 CE became the introduction of the Upanishads to the western world, and was therefore not available to Novalis when he wrote *The Novices of Sais* (on which he ceased work in 1799). Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) are most commonly credited with embracing and praising these texts, increasing their popularity in the western world.

6 Neuroscientist Tony Nader, MD, PhD (2000) writes about how the Veda also gives rise to the structures and functions of human physiology (which is out of scope for this current project). His work focuses on the understanding that everything is made of vibrations and that the various fields join in a unified field. Even thought is a vibration of consciousness. His work shows that science found its success by restricting itself to objective knowledge, carefully excluding subjectivity (and therefore consciousness). The Vedic civilization explored consciousness so deeply as to make it a science. Nader is the successor of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who was also a researcher in Veda and consciousness.

7 Cowan (2008) also notes, “In an essay entitled ‘Die Sprachen,’ August Wilhelm describes the grammatical perfection of Sanskrit as the language of heaven, its characters having been designed by God himself” (p. 327).

perfect or complete.⁸ There are only a few specific references to India in Novalis' encyclopedia project, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*The General Notebook*, 1798/99), which he worked on in tandem with *The Novices of Sais*, but scholars have identified the ways in which he integrated ideas of ancient India into his writings.⁹ In the "Einleitung der Herausgeber" ("Introduction by the Editors") to *The Novices of Sais*, the editors, Kluckhohn and Samuel (1960), explain:

Because Novalis already speaks of "true Sanskrit" in the beginning, the influence that Georg Forster's Sanskrit studies must have had on him cannot be overlooked. They can be found in Forster's introduction and commentary for the translation of Kalidasa's Sakuntala (1791) and in a few essays in the "Short Writings," that Friedrich Schlegel included in his essays about Forster (Lyceum, I, 1, 1791). Forster, following his teacher Sir William Jones, describes Sanskrit as the "holy language" (...). (My translation)

Da Novalis aber schon zu Anfang der Dichtung von "echter Sanskrit" spricht, so darf doch nicht der Eindruck übersehen werden, den Georg Forsters Sanskritstudien auf ihn gemacht haben müssen. Sie finden sich in Forsters Einleitung und Erläuterungen zu seiner Übersetzung von Kalidasas Sakuntala (1791) und in einigen Aufsätzen in den "Kleinen Schriften," die Friedrich Schlegel zu seinen Essays über Forster (Lyceum, I, 1, 1797) veranlaßten. Forster, seinem Lehrer Sir William Jones folgend, bezeichnet Sanskrit als die "heilige Sprache" (...). (p. 77)¹⁰

Like Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis received great inspiration from the drama *Sakuntala* in his philosophy of becoming (Cowan, 2008, p. 327). He explores this in his conception of *Poesie* and in the *process* of the novices' search for the universal language in order to discover the inner reaches of the self. He did not study the Sanskrit texts or translations as Friedrich Schelling and the Schlegel brothers later did (indeed, he passed away too soon), and only mentions "Sanskrit" once in his writings—in the opening section of *The Novices of Sais*.¹¹ "Sanskrit" therefore remains

8 Schlegel (1800) defines *Universalpoesie* in *Athenäum* fragment 116: "Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its purpose is not merely to reunite all the separate genres of poetry, and to put poetry in contact with philosophy and rhetoric. It wants, and should also mix poetry and prose, genius and criticism, art poetry and poetry of nature, soon to merge, to make poetry lively and sociable, to make life and society poetic, to poeticize the joke, and the forms of art with a rich educational material of every kind fill and saturate, and animate by the vibrations of humor. (...) The romantic type of poetry is still in the process of becoming; yes, that is their very nature, that they can only become eternal, never be perfect. It cannot be exhausted by any theory, and only a divinatory critique would dare to characterize its ideal. She alone is infinite, as she alone is free, and who acknowledges as her first law that the poet's arbitrariness does not suffer any law over herself. The romantic type of poetry is the only one that is more than art, and, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or is supposed to be romantic." (My translation) (Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie. Ihre Bestimmung ist nicht bloß, alle getrennte Gattungen der Poesie wieder zu vereinigen, und die Poesie mit der Philosophie und Rhetorik in Berührung zu setzen. Sie will, und soll auch Poesie und Prosa, Genialität und Kritik, Kunstpoesie und Naturpoesie bald mischen, bald verschmelzen, die Poesie lebendig und gesellig, und das Leben und die Gesellschaft poetisch machen, den Witz poetisieren, und die Formen der Kunst mit gediegnem Bildungsstoff jeder Art anfüllen und sättigen, und durch die Schwingungen des Humors beseelen. (...) Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden, und nur eine divinatorische Kritik dürfte es wagen, ihr Ideal charakterisieren zu wollen. Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist, und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide. Die romantische Dichtart ist die einzige, die mehr als Art, und gleichsam die Dichtkunst selbst ist: denn in einem gewissen Sinn ist oder soll alle Poesie romantisch sein.)

9 In regard to Indian gods, see Volume I, p. 111; III, p. 590. For Indian fairy-tales, see II, p. 280 and III, p. 587. The index to Novalis' writings (Volume V) misses his reference to "indischen Heymath" (Indian homeland) in III, p. 285. The only reference to "Sanskrit" specifically is found in *The Novices of Sais*, I, p. 79.

10 It is also important to credit Herder's *Ideen* (Ideas) in bringing the German readership the first overall picture of India. In 1871 he received Georg Forster's translation of the play by Kalidasa, *Sakuntala, oder der entscheidende Ring*, which was the first translation of Sanskrit into German (via the English translation by William Jones). Herder contributed a forward for Forster's publication, and both Herder and Forster are credited with expressing great value in intercultural dialogue. However, Dauer (1965) argues that Herder created an ideal India of his own, having very little to do with actual India, as he never traveled there. Forster's approach is paternalistic in nature, argues Esleben (2003), as he conceptualizes the exchange between Europeans and Indians as similar to the relationship between fathers and their children (p. 227).

11 Dauer (1965) analyzes Novalis' adoption of endless reincarnation in the search for the blue flower in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (*Henry of Ofterdingen*, 1802), as well as the significance of the dream state in relation to the yoga elements in Buddhism. However, Novalis had already begun his explorations of the dream-state in *The Novices of Sais*, especially in the embedded fairy-tale, "Hyacinth and Rosenblümchen" ("Hyacinth and Rose Petal").

an abstract ideal in his thought. He seems to take his cue from Forster's introduction to his translation of *Sakuntala* for the very basis of his narrative. Forster writes:

The accumulation of experiences of all kinds, partly directly with our own senses, and partly through the writings, consequently becomes the preparation for the most convenient application of our being here (Hierseyns) (...). (My translation)

Die Einsammlung von Erfahrungen aller Art, theils unmittelbar mit eigenen Sinnen, theils mittelbar durch die Schriftzüge, wird folglich die Vorbereitung zur zweckmäßigsten Anwendung unseren Hierseyns (...). (p. XXVII)

Jörg Esleben (2003) points out that in his "Vorrede" ("Introduction"), Forster suggests that the German Romantics, "due to geographical and historical factors, have the 'eklektischen Charakter' ['eclectic character'] that enables them to collect, study, and order, in an unselfish and disinterested fashion, the fragmented and varied instances of beauty, goodness, and perfection that are scattered all over the world" (p. 219). Interestingly, this is precisely Novalis' approach to the novices' search for the universal language of nature; they are searching for this language by gathering and organizing objects of nature and tracing lines in the sand. However, why would Novalis emphasize the "true" ("echte") Sanskrit of nature, if he is writing about actual Sanskrit? It seems, rather, that Novalis is proposing a *different* Sanskrit, a "true" holy writing, one that is not only writing, but also "speaks" from objects of nature, including the human body—and therefore not only spoken or transcribed by humans.

According to Novalis in his literary fragment *The Novices of Sais*, all of nature has the same original substance...a *Sprachlehre* (grammar). This *Sprachlehre* is the key to the *Wunderschrift* (magic writing) of nature. The *true Sanskrit* of nature is described as one in movement—figures appear and disappear—bringing thoughts and wishes, and, as the novices are hoping to discover, also letters and words. Looking for this lost universal language, these seekers of nature's deepest mysteries search through objects of nature in order to discover a language that emerges from inside these objects—and themselves, as both sound and written signs in one. The language consists of not only writing ("Schrift"), but also images ("Bilder"), figures ("Figuren"), light ("Licht"), and sound ("Klang"). One key to interpreting this mysterious combination of attributes is subtly apparent in the opening paragraph of the literary fragment:

*Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compare them will see **strange figures** emerge, **figures which seem to belong to that great cipher** which we discern written everywhere, in wings, eggshells, clouds and snow, in crystals and in stone formations, on ice-covered waters, on the inside and outside of mountains, of plants, beasts and men, in the lights of heaven, **on scored disks of pitch or glass** or in iron filings round a magnet, and in strange conjunctions of chance. In them we suspect a key to the magic writing, even a grammar.... **Only at moments do their desires and thoughts seem to solidify. Thus arise their presentiments, but after a short time everything swims again before their eyes.** (p. 3/5, my emphasis)¹²*

*Mannigfache Wege gehen die Menschen. Wer sie verfolgt und vergleicht, wird **wunderliche Figuren** entstehen sehn; **Figuren, die zu jener großen Chifferschrift zu gehören scheinen**, die man überall, auf Flügeln, Eierschalen, in Wolken, im Schnee,*

12 The translation by Manheim (Novalis, 2005) contains graphic artwork on every other page, so the page numbers of the story are always on odd pages.

in Kristallen und in Steinbildungen, aufgefrierenden Wassern, im Innern und Äußern der Gebirge, der Pflanzen, der Tiere, der Menschen, in den Lichtern des Himmels, auf berührten und gestrichenen Scheiben von Pech und Glas, in den Feilspänen um den Magnet her, und sonderbaren Konjunkturen des Zufalls erblickt. In ihnen ahndet man den Schlüssel dieser Wunderschrift, die Sprachlehre derselben.... Nur augenblicklich scheinen ihre Wünsche, ihre Gedanken sich zu verdichten. So entstehen ihre Ahnungen, aber nach kurzen Zeiten schwimmt alles wieder, wie vorher, vor ihren Blicken. (I, p. 79, my emphasis)

The list of objects and phenomena of nature are suddenly contrasted by the phrase “on scored disks of pitch or glass” (“auf berührten und gestrichenen Scheiben von Pech und Glas”) (I, p. 79). What Novalis describes here are materials used in the formation of sound figures.¹³

Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni (1756–1827), a German physicist, inventor and amateur musician, was the first to perform extensive experiments on the sound figures, and he published his findings in *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klangs* (Discoveries on the Theory of Sound) in 1787. He is ultimately the one who became famous for them, known today in English as “Chladni Figures.”¹⁴ He demonstrated various modes of vibration on rigid surfaces by placing sand (or other fine material) on a circular, square or rectangular surface and drawing a bow along the edge. The sand bounces with the vibration and settles at the nodal points, where there is no vibration. These nodal points become the intricate figures that form on the plates. These figures became integral in the development of acoustics and instrument building, for which Chladni is named the father of acoustics.¹⁵

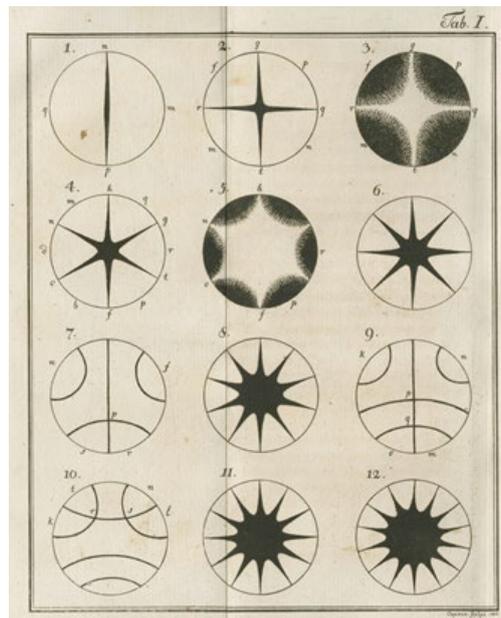


Figure 1: Table 1 from *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klangs*, 1787.¹⁶

13 This has been previously recognized by Bonds (1997), who mentions in a footnote that Novalis' opening paragraph of *The Novices of Sais* contains a reference to Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni's *Klangfiguren* (198), but he does not analyze this aspect of Novalis' text further. Menke (1999) also writes that Novalis studied and worked on the *Klangfiguren* in his notes for *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*.

14 I will continue to use the general term “sound figures” to differentiate between the Romantics' use of them and that of Chladni.

15 Many influential studies have been undertaken on Chladni, acoustics, and the history of instrument building; see for example Ullmann (2012) and Jackson (2006).

16 Image from “Ernst Chladni” (2016).

I argue that sound figures play a prominent role in *The Novices of Sais* in Novalis' concept of the development of *Poesie* as a universal language, and are alluded to through poetic, metaphorical imagery. Novalis mixes the subjective, abstract, and ideal experience of Sanskrit, which only the teacher (like the Rishi) experiences with the objective, scientific analysis of the sound figures. However, the sound figures that Novalis poeticizes are not those directly interpreted by Chladni, whose focus was on the study of vibrational patterns of tones, but rather are a result of his collaboration with friend and physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776–1810), who developed a galvanic interpretation of the “Chladni Figures.”¹⁷ Whereas Chladni writes of “Schallwellen” (“sound waves”), Ritter writes of “Schallstrahlen” (“sound rays”),¹⁸ arguing that sound and light are one. In his “Appendix” to *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers (Fragments from the Estate of a Young Physicist, 1810)*, Ritter interprets the sound figures as representing the universal language of nature, with sound containing its own writing—sound that can be seen, and writing that can be heard—a language that is therefore revealed with the human body as its instrument.¹⁹ His text, along with Novalis' fragments on the sound figures, help provide a key to read the abstract imagery in *The Novices of Sais* as an analogy for Novalis' “true Sanskrit” of nature.

2. Sound Figures According to Novalis and Ritter

In fragment 245 of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon (The General Notebook)*, Novalis defines the nature of speaking language through metaphors, including the physical attributes of the sound figures:

245. *Music. Consonants are fingerings, and their sequences and alternations belong to the application. Vowels are strings of sound, or batons of air. The lungs are [the] bow in motion. (...)* (p. 37)²⁰

245. *MUSIK. Die Consonanten sind die Fingersetzungen und ihre Folge und Abwechslung gehört zur Aplicatur. Die Vocale sind die tönenden Saiten, oder Luftstäbe.*²¹ *Die Lunge ist der bewegte Bogen. (...)* (III, p. 285)

These first three sentences call to mind not only a stringed instrument being played by hand, but also a human voice producing sounds with the mouth by way of the movement of air from the lung up through the vibrating column of the throat. The “finger placements” (“Fingersetzungen”) also evoke the fingers placed on the edges of a plate to form additional nodal lines of a sound figure, and the “moving bow” (“bewegte Bogen”) which draws them stimulates the movement of the sand and sound from the plate (see Figure 2).²²

17 Ritter later collaborated with Hans Christian Ørsted (1777–1851) on this project. For a detailed account of the partnership and collaboration between Ritter and Ørsted, see Christensen (1995).

18 Menke (1999), p. 70.

19 Benjamin (1963) was the first to recognize the importance of the “Appendix” for its conceptual work on the relation of language, music, and writing (pp. 240–243).

20 The translation by Wood (Novalis, 2007) misses the “the” in “Die Lunge ist *der* bewegte Bogen.”

21 Here, “Luftstäbe,” translated as “batons of air,” is a poetic license for wind instruments, indicating an air column of a rigid vibrating body.

22 For a demonstration of how Chladni Figures are formed, this video, although of poor visual quality, is helpful: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlIBfYdddhU> (Cortel 2009).

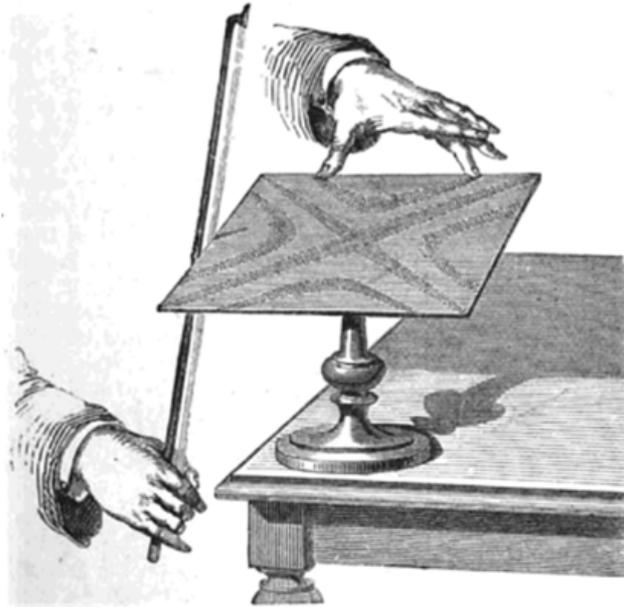


Figure 2: From William Henry Stone (1879) *Elementary Lessons on Sound*.

Of particular relevance to this analysis is Novalis' interpretation in Fragment 362 which, as I will show, is very similar to Ritter's.²³

362. PHYSICS AND GRAMMAR. *A dampened sound in close proximity appears far away to us./ Lateral motions of the air in sound. **Figurelike motions of sound, like letters of the alphabet.** (Were letters originally acoustic figures? Letters a priori?) (...) Colored images are figures of light. **The light ray is the [striking] bow of [the] violin.**²⁴ (...) Every word should be an acoustic formula for its construction and pronunciation—the pronunciation itself is a higher, imitative sign of a higher pronunciation—Construction of the meaning of a word. (...)*" (p. 54, bolded text my emphasis)

362. PHYS[IK] UND GRAMM[ATIK]. *Ein gedämpfter, sehr naher Ton dünkt uns weit zu seyn./ Lateralbewegungen der Luft beym Schall. **Figurirte Schallbewegungen wie Buchstaben.** (Sollten die Buchstaben ursprünglich acustische Figuren gewesen seyn. Buchst[aben] a priori?) (...) Farbenbilder sind Lichtfiguren. **Der Lichtstrahl ist der streichende Fiedelbogen.** (...) Jedes Wort sollte eine acustische Formel seiner Construction, seiner Aussprache seyn – die Aussprache selbst ist ein Höheres, mimisches Zeichen einer höhern Aussprache – Sinnconstruction des Worts. (...)* (III, p. 305, bolded text my emphasis)

23 Early 20th century Novalis-Ritter scholar Heilborn (1901) accuses Ritter of plagiarism here (p. 135), but Specht (2010) argues that it was rather a product of their Romantic concept of "Symphilosophie"—the integration of many voices into one's own thinking (p. 159). A similar approach is found in music. Composers have been known to take musical quotes from other composers in honor of the composer and quoted piece (known commonly as "borrowing"). In Burkholder's (2019) definition, "Musical borrowing has typically been studied as an issue related to a particular repertory or genre, such as the Renaissance mass or the 20th-century avant garde, or to a particular composer, such as Handel or Mahler. Yet the use of existing music as a basis for new music is pervasive in all periods and traditions, parallel to and yet different from the practices of borrowing, reworking and allusion that contribute to the formation of traditions and the creation of meaning in literature, architecture, painting and sculpture."

24 Wood's (2007) translation is "The light ray is the stroked bow of a violin," but it should be "The light ray is the *striking* bow of *the* violin."

Looking at these figures as though they are letters, Novalis sees the basis of the language of nature. With each word then as an “acoustic formula” of its construction and pronunciation, Novalis emphasizes that there should be no separation between the signifier, its sound, and the signified. The word, sound or “acoustic formula”, and meaning (“Sinnconstruction,” which Novalis describes as a “mimetic sign of a higher pronunciation”) should ideally be one. Sanskrit offers a helpful model: Hopkins (1971) explains, “Sanskrit words were not just arbitrary labels assigned to phenomena; they were the sound forms of objects, actions, and attributes (...)” (p. 20). Rather than interpreting this language of nature as an expression of human words, Novalis imagines that the language is always in itself an expression of being.

Novalis’ ideas of language intermingle with scientific observations of the figures in the remainder of the fragment—from the movements of light and warmth, to a description of an experiment with phosphorus powder.²⁵ These notes indicate that he worked with these materials himself, similar to the way Ritter records his experimental work and plans. His scientific descriptions are also complemented by combinations of scientific observation and poetic metaphor, for example, “The ray of light is the striking bow of the violin.” But then what does light have to do with the sound figures? Ritter makes similar claims as Novalis in the “Appendix” to his *Fragments* from 1810 but explains them further.

Ritter’s “Appendix” oscillates between passages addressing scientific observations of the sound figures and poetic speculations on the relationships between music and language. The opening first few pages of the “Appendix” closely follow a letter that he wrote to Hans Christian Ørsted, in which he discusses the electrical qualities of the sound figures and speculates on performing similar experiments via chemical materials—thereby creating *chemical* sound figures.²⁶ Suddenly, in the third paragraph he writes:

—*It would be nice if that which is externally clear here, would be precisely that which the sound-figure is to us innerly:—light figure, firewriting). Every tone thus has its letter immediately by itself; and the question is whether we do not in fact only hear writing,—read, when we hear,—see writing!—And is not every seeing with the inner eye hearing, and hearing a seeing of, and through, within?* (p. 473)

—*Schön, wäre es, wie, was hier äußerlich klar würde, genau auch wäre, was uns die Klangfigur innerlich ist:—Lichtfigur. Feuerschrift). Jeder Ton hat somit seinen Buchstaben immediate bey sich; und es ist die Frage, ob wir nicht überhaupt nur Schrift hören,—lesen, wenn wir hören,—Schrift sehen!—Und ist nicht jedes Sehen*

25 “(...) What takes the place of sand here? One actually (forces) the sound to impress itself—to become *enciphered*—on a *copperplate*. Further application of this idea. (Strew phosphorus powder on a plate—so that it absorbs the colors of the *different light*, or after gently *heating*, so that it combusts—and radiates—the differently formed and diversely contacted bodies in strange figures—Preparation of such a powder). (...)” (p. 54) (“(...) Was vertritt wohl hier die Stelle des Sandes? Man (zwingt) eigentlich den Schall sich selbst *abzudrucken* – zu *chiffriren* – auf eine *Kupfertafel* zu bringen. Weitere Anwendung dieser Idee. (Bestreuung einer Tafel mit Phosphorpulver – das die Farben des *verschiednen Lichts* annähme, oder das bey einer gelinden *Erwärmung* verschiedengestalteter und mannichfach berührter Körper in sonderbaren Figuren brennte – und leuchtete – Bereitung eines solchen Pulvers.) (...)” (III, p. 305))

26 Hans Christian Ørsted, with whom Ritter studied and was in close contact, was a Danish physicist and chemist who worked with various plates of metal, glass, sand and other materials to produce sound figures. He modeled his figures after the work of Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni (whom Ritter also mentions in his fragments). Together, Ørsted and Ritter were able to displace earlier resonance theories by discovering that no vibration can occur without electricity—which is his interpretation of added energy (Erlmann, 2014, p. 194). Music as sound also contains electricity, and therefore also light. Ritter is not just writing on a poetic, Romantic notion, but rather sees the electric current in connection with the sound figures as an energy force necessary for life on multiple levels. Strässle (2004) argues that “Chladni’s and Oersted’s *Klangfiguren* were no more than external visualizations of acoustic phenomena. Ritter’s aim, however, is rather different in that he is attempting to theorize the inner representation of tone” (p. 31). However, Ørsted’s work in *Naturphilosophie* is largely overlooked in the scholarship—his work was more in line with Ritter than with Chladni. Christensen (1995) explains that Ørsted went on to discover electromagnetism in 1820, which Ritter did not live long enough to experience. “Ørsted’s discovery was probably inspired by Ritter’s failed experiment of 1803 on galvanism and magnetism” (Christensen, 1995, p. 164).

mit dem innern Auge Hören, und Hören ein Sehen von und durch innen? (p. 472)²⁷

Ritter wishes to discover that that which is clear in the outer appearances of the sound figures could be as clear on the *inside* of the body. He suggests that the appearance of this language could be connected in an organic, perhaps synaesthetic way within the body as a result of the combined perception from the eyes and ears. In a footnote to this passage after the word “firewriting” (“Feuerschrift”), Ritter explains that there are electrical processes which accompany the emergence of tone as a part of oxidation processes. He therefore questions whether sound is not also accompanied by light, which would suggest a more *natural*, organic connection between that which is visible and that which is audible—that seeing and hearing the language should happen at the same time.²⁸ Unlike in the semiotic theory of human language in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), which shows how sounds are arbitrarily assigned to the symbols/letters of an alphabet and the signifier and signified are therefore separate from each other, this language of nature, the word itself, comes from the object it is describing—they are contained in each other:²⁹

In general, however, the writing must be that which is written by language, by tone, by the word itself. Here one maintains for music, or the general language, the hieroglyph, or [the one] which completely writes out the entire tone, the entire chord, etc. The speaking [thing] is identical to the spoken since everything only speaks itself. The matter itself is therefore here the writing, the note. (...) All writing must relate to the hieroglyph as organ to organic whole (...). (p. 489)

Ueberall aber muß die Schrift das von der Sprache, dem Ton, dem Worte, selbst, Geschriebene, seyn. Hier erhält man dann für die Musik, oder die allgemeine Sprache, die Hieroglyphe, oder die völlig vollständig den ganzen Ton, den ganzen Accord, u. s. w. ausschreibt. Das Sprechende ist dem Ausgesprochenen gleich, da alles nur sich selbst ausspricht. Die Sache selbst ist als hier die Schrift, die Note. (...) Alle Schrift zusammen muß sich zur Hieroglyphe wie Organ zum organischen Ganzen (...) verhalten. (p. 488)

Just as the appearance of sound and light are inseparable, so, too, is the relationship between the spoken and written word. Unlike Novalis, Ritter places importance on the concept of the hieroglyph here. By the time Ritter wrote this “Appendix,” the Rosetta Stone had already been discovered, so the possibility of translating the hieroglyphs was a reality.

As signs that represent “logograms (words), phonograms (sounds), and determinatives (placed at the end of the word to help clarify its meaning)”³⁰ the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt (however static) provide Ritter with an example of how to approach uncovering the multi-

27 Translator Holland (Ritter, 2010) offers a bilingual edition of Ritter’s *Fragments* and “Appendix.” The page numbers for the German quotes will always precede those of the corresponding translation.

28 In connection with the language-nature of the sound figures, Ritter writes about the *Lichtenberg Figuren* (“Lichtenberg Figures”), which were discovered by German physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799) and are produced by applying an electric current through solids, liquids, or gases. Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni had initially received the idea to perform the sound figures experiments after having studied Lichtenberg’s *Lichtfiguren*. Interestingly, these Lichtenberg Figures can also appear on the surface of the human body, for example, after being hit by lightning—a scarring, or as Ritter would argue, a “writing” that appears on the outside of the body. See for example Domart, Garet, E. and Garet, Y. (2000).

29 Novalis takes this idea further, suggesting that the word should also be a mimetic sign of its “higher pronunciation,” that is, its “meaning”: “Every word should be an acoustic formula for its construction and pronunciation—the pronunciation itself is a higher, *imitative sign* of a higher pronunciation—*Construction of the meaning* of a word.” (p. 54) (“Jedes Wort sollte eine acustische Formel seiner Construction, seiner Aussprache seyn – die Aussprache selbst ist ein Höheres, *mimisches Zeichen* einer höhern Aussprache – *Sinnconstruction* des Worts.” (III, p. 305))

30 Scoville (2015).

layered essence of music as a universal language through the sound figures—not as understood by the mind, but rather by the body. Ritter sees language—both written and spoken—as an entire, organic system in motion.³¹ Electricity, in his thinking, is the means by which light and sound travel—it is what connects humans with nature, and in turn, the entire universe. Music occupies and exists in space, then, not only in time. Indeed, he calls upon the Music of the Spheres to support his claim, suggesting that the music of all worldly bodies travels from the sun through the rays of light—that music, the general language, which split into specific languages, originated from the sun.³² He continues this thought:

The world, as far as it is and can become visible is this letter, this writing. The word writes, the letter resounds; each, inseparable is being, consciousness, life; and so on up to God. Writing, word, light, and consciousness fall into one. The eye [is] the sense for writing which can only be recognized on and through the sound. The sound itself however is light, which must already belong to another sense than the eye because the eye does not see the light but rather only by way of light = tone. (p. 485)

Die Welt, soweit sie sichtbar ist, und werden kann, ist dieser Buchstabe, diese Schrift. Das Wort schreibt, der Buchstabe tönt; beydes in seiner Unzertrennbarkeit ist das Sein, das Bewußtseyn, das Leben; so herauf bis zum Gott. Schrift, Wort, Licht und Bewußtseyn fallen in Eins. Das Auge der Sinn für Schrift, die nur am und durch den Ton erkannt werden kann. Der Ton selbst aber ist Licht, das ohnehin einem anderen Sinne, als dem Auge, gehören mußte, weil das Auge das Licht nicht sieht, sondern nur vermittelst des Lichts = Tons. (p. 484)

Just as there are types of light that are not visible to the human eye (for example ultraviolet rays, which Ritter discovered in 1801), Ritter postulates that there are also sounds, not audible by the human ear. Because sound and light waves do not interfere with each other, Ritter finds them to be intimately connected; in fact, toward the end of his “Appendix” he concludes, “Therefore: *tone and light do not interfere with each other!* How could they however, in essence, since they are indeed *one?*” (p. 507) (“Also: *Ton und Licht stören sich nicht!* —Wie aber im Grunde auch könnten sie es, da sie ja Eins sind?” (p. 506)).

While today we know that sound and light are not one and the same, Ritter’s theory was ahead of its time, as it was not until Heinrich Hertz’s discovery of radio waves in 1886 that there was scientific proof that sound can travel via invisible light waves.³³ Ritter suggests then, that like the direct relationship between sound and light, and the spoken and written word in these figures, the understanding of the self can be uncovered in the same way by studying this phenomenon in nature—which brings us back to *The Novices of Sais*.

31 As Wetzels (1971) writes, the Jena Romantics, inspired by Friedrich Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, thought of nature as “one huge living organism;” they therefore desired to find the “soul” of this all-encompassing unity of inorganic and organic nature (p. 45). Erlmann (2014) adds, “Nature was seen as a coherent whole, with Volta’s electric pile being but one element in a long chain joining the organic and inorganic. In fact, the cosmos itself was seen as an immense battery and galvanism as the ‘key to the entry into innermost Nature’” (p. 191).

32 Echoing Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) in “Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache” (“Treatise on the Origins of Language, 1772”), Ritter asserts that sound, and therefore music, was the first general language—then, human languages developed from it. See especially pp. 473–476 in the “Appendix” for the German and English references to Herder.

33 Shlain (1991) explains, “Although radio waves are at the far end of the electromagnetic spectrum and are invisible, they are a form of light” (p. 285).

3. Poetic Sound Figures in *The Novices of Sais*

As mentioned in my introduction, in Novalis' story, the *true Sanskrit* is described as not only writing, but also image, figure, light, and sound. These descriptions are spread throughout the narrative and not all of the elements are described at once. This is indicative of the novices' search for the elusive universal language of nature, which they have not yet experienced, but of which they have heard. Novalis' fragment 511 on *Poesie* in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*The General Notebook*) explains this approach:

[511.] *Poesie must never be the main material, always only the miraculous. One should not represent what one would not fully overlook, distinctly perceive, and of which one would be quite a master—for example in the representations of the transcendental.* (My translation)

[511.] *Die Poesie muß nie der Hauptstoff, immer nur das Wunderbare seyn. Man sollte nichts darstellen, was man nicht völlig übersähe, deutlich vernähme, und ganz Meister desselben wäre – z. B. bey Darstellungen des Übersinnlichen.* (III, p. 640)

For this reason, the novices are not able to represent precisely what the teacher experiences in the descriptions of their observations. The novice who is the narrator of the opening section, explains that only the teacher, like the Rishi (the "seer" of the Vedas), has access to experiencing this language. He observes:

A little later, there was one who said: "The holy scripture needs no explanation. He who speaks true, is full of eternal life, his written word seems wondrously akin to the mysteries, for it is a chord taken from the symphony of the universe." Surely the voice was speaking of our teacher, for he knows how to gather together the traits that are scattered everywhere. A unique light is kindled in his eyes when he lays down the sacred rune before us and peers into our eyes to see whether in us the [star] is risen that makes the figure visible and intelligible. (p. 5/7, my emphasis)³⁴

Nicht lange darauf sprach einer: „Keiner Erklärung bedarf die heilige Schrift. Wer wahrhaft spricht, ist des ewigen Lebens voll, und wunderbar verwandt mit echten Geheimnissen dünkt uns seine Schrift, denn sie ist ein Akkord aus des Weltalls Symphonie.“ Von unserm Lehrer sprach gewiß die Stimme, denn er versteht die Züge zu versammeln, die überall zerstreut sind. Ein eignes Licht entzündet sich in seinen Blicken, wenn vor uns nun die hohe Rune liegt, und er in unsern Augen späht, ob auch in uns aufgegangen ist das Gestirn, das die Figur sichtbar und verständlich macht. (I, p. 79, my emphasis)

Here, he describes several elements of the language. The "holy writing" is a chord from the symphony of the universe. Only the teacher knows how to bring the "traits" ("Züge") together—a light emerges from his eyes when he lays the sacred rune before the novices' eyes, and he looks into theirs to see if the image of the star has formed, that this figure makes visible and understandable. The novice continues:

³⁴ Manheim (2005) translates this last line as "...whether in us the light is risen that makes the figure visible and intelligible." "Light" misses the original German "Gestirn," which means star, and emphasizes not only the light but the shape of the light like a sound figure.

*Often he has told us how when he was a child, the desire [to] practice, to busy, and to fulfill his senses left him no peace. He looked up at the **stars and copied their paths and positions in the sand**. Unremittingly he observed the heavens, and never wearied of contemplating [**his**] clarity, [**his**] movements, [**his**] clouds, [**his**] lights.³⁵ He gathered stones, flowers, insects of all sorts, and **arranged them in rows of many different kinds**. (...) The perceptions of his senses crowded into **great colorful images; he heard, saw, touched and thought at once**. (p. 7/9, my emphasis)*

*Oft hat er uns erzählt, wie ihm als Kind der Trieb, die Sinne zu üben, zu beschäftigen und zu erfüllen, keine Ruhe ließ. **Den Sternen sah er zu und ahmte ihre Züge, ihre Stellung im Sande nach**. In's Luftmeer sah er ohne Rast, und ward nicht müde **seine Klarheit, seine Bewegungen, seine Wolken, seine Lichter** zu betrachten. Er sammelte sich Steine, Blumen, Käfer aller Art, und **legte sie auf mannigfache Weise sich in Reihen**. (...) In große bunte Bilder drängten sich die Wahrnehmungen seiner Sinne: er **hörte, sah, tastete und dachte zugleich**. (I, pp. 79–80, my emphasis)*

This is the first instance in the literary fragment where the novice describes how the teacher creates these figures: from the stars, which he imitates in the sand, and from objects he collects from nature, which he lays in rows. By gathering objects of nature or tracing the stars in the sand, the teacher creates the form that produces a sound (that at this point only he can hear). But it is not just sound—a mixing of the senses occurs—a synaesthetic reaction, which allows for deeper understanding through *feeling* (recall Schlegel (1808) describing the “feines Gefühl,” “fine feeling” of Sanskrit). The novices, as though in unison, lament that humanity cannot hear the inner music of nature anymore, and therefore cannot sense the figures inside themselves. If the human could learn to feel again, “then the stars would arise within him” (p. 71) (“dann gingen die Gestirne in ihm auf” (I, p. 96)).

The stones are mentioned several times throughout the story—they are placed in many “rows” or “rays” that touch each other, like an image of stars or the sun, which is a common form and variation of the traditional sound figures. Recall Ritter’s assertion in his “Appendix” about the physical sun in the universe, which represents the opposite movement—the splitting that happens from music (the general language) into specific languages is from the source, the sun outward (p. 484). Novalis’ *manmade* sound figures then represent the retracing of the rays back to the source—and the self.

Just like Ritter’s assertion that the writing of the sound figures is already present before their excitation, so too is the knowledge of the self already present and needs only be set in motion. In Novalis’ text, this process of deciphering must be *developed* with a combination of contemplation about the outer and inner worlds.

*[If one would have only first brought out a few movements] to serve **as nature’s [letters]**, the deciphering would become increasingly simple and our power over the movement and generation of thoughts would enable us to produce natural ideas and natural compositions even without any preceding real impression, and then the ultimate end would be attained. (p. 81, my emphasis)³⁶*

35 Manheim translates this line as “...their clarity, their movements, their clouds, their lights,” when the original clearly specifies “seine,” “his.”

36 Manheim translates “Hätte man dann nur erst einige Bewegungen” as “Once we had evolved thought processes,” which misses that Novalis writes here of “movements,” which can be related to the wave forms of sound. He also translates “Buchstaben der Natur” as “nature’s code,” losing the significance of letters making up an alphabet—they represent precisely what they are: likewise, wave forms are the building blocks of tones.

*Hätte man dann nur erst einige Bewegungen, als **Buchstaben der Natur**, herausgebracht, so würde das Dechiffrieren immer leichter von statten gehen, und die Macht über die Gedankenerzeugung und Bewegung den Beobachter in Stand setzen, auch ohne vorhergegangenen wirklichen Eindruck, Naturgedanken hervorzubringen und Naturkompositionen zu entwerfen, und dann wäre der Endzweck erreicht. (I, p. 98, my emphasis)*

The novices’ ultimate goal is to understand these figures as letters of an alphabet, so that the language can be deciphered with more ease. Here the base form of the inner sound figures is named, just as in both Novalis’ fragment and Ritter’s “Appendix”—first the letters of nature must be found, which will then ultimately form the language of nature.

So, the novices begin their search in the outer world of nature in order to rediscover their inner connections—the key to which only they have. Some say,

*What need to journey warily through the dismal world of visible things? **For the purer world lies in us**, in this source. (...) We need not inquire at length; an easy comparison, a few lines in the sand are enough, and we shall understand. Thus all things are a great manuscript to which we hold the key... (p. 47, my emphasis)*

*Was brauchen wir die trübe Welt der sichtbaren Dinge mühsam zu durchwandern? **Die reinere Welt liegt ja in uns**, in diesem Quell. (...) Wir brauchen nicht erst lange nachzuforschen, eine leichte Vergleichung, nur wenige **Züge im Sande sind genug, um uns zu verständigen. So ist uns alle eine große Schrift, wozu wir den Schlüssel haben...** (I, pp. 89–90, my emphasis)*

According to Novalis, it is not mankind as a whole who has this particular gift—it is reserved for a special kind of human—the poet. The poet is the one who can make words out of the lines of movement (I, p. 102). He follows the path of the scientist and picks up where he left off (I, p. 103–104).³⁷ With this, he has the gift of reading the “labyrinth paths” like a “map” (I, p. 103).³⁸

In the seemingly climatic moment of the literary fragment, the narrator steps back from tuning into the conversations between the novices and travelers they encounter, and hears the “musical pronunciation” of their speech:

*(...) **Their speech was a wondrous song**, its irresistible tones penetrated deep into the inwardness of nature and split it apart. Each of their names seemed to be the key to the soul of each thing in nature. With creative power these vibrations called forth all images of the world’s phenomena, and the life of the universe can rightly be said to have been an eternal dialogue of a thousand voices; for in the language of those men*

37 “The **scientist** follows their steps and gathers every treasure they have let fall in their innocence and joy, the **poet**, filled with sympathy, does homage to their love, and seeks in his **songs** to transplant this love, this germ of the golden age, into other times and lands.” (pp. 101/103) (“(...) Ihren Tritten folgt der **Forscher**, um jedes Kleinod zu sammeln, was sie in ihrer Unschuld und Freude haben fallen lassen, ihrer Liebe huldigt der mitfühlende **Dichter** und such durch seine **Gesänge** diese Liebe, diesen Keim des goldnen Alters, in andre Zeiten und Länder zu verpflanzen.” (pp. 103–104))

38 Unlike Novalis, Ritter gives the power to understand and create the musical universal language of nature directly to the composer, suggesting that music can be used to manipulate its listeners, for good and for evil. Ritter explains in his “Appendix”: “Composers can achieve an infinitely great dignity. They **manage an entire race related to mankind**; they allow its **servants** and **angels** to appear, and they can also summon its **devils**. They will never succeed in the latter as much as the former; and thus of the glorious, **good apparitions in music** there are more significant ones, and far more, than the ones which are **worthy of contempt**.” (p. 479) (“Componisten können zu einer unendlich hohen Würde gelangen. **Sie verwalten ein ganzes dem Menschen verwandtes Geschlecht**; seine **Diener** und seine **Engel** lassen sie erscheinen, und auch seine **Teufel** können sie aufrufen. Aber das letzte wird ihnen nie zu jenem Grade gelingen, wie das erste; und so sind der herrlichen, **guten Erscheinungen in der Musik** bedeutendere und weit mehrere da, als der **verachtungswürdigen**.” (p. 478))

all forces, all modes of action seemed miraculously united. To seek out the ruins of this language, or at least all reports concerning it, had been one of the main purposes of their journey.... (p. 113, my emphasis)

(...) Ihre Aussprache war ein wunderbarer Gesang, dessen unwiderstehliche Töne tief in das Innere jeder Natur eindringen und sie zerlegen. Jeder ihrer Namen schien das Losungswort für die Seele jedes Naturkörpers. Mit schöpferischer Gewalt erregten diese Schwingungen alle Bilder der Welterscheinungen, und von ihnen konnte man mit Recht sagen, daß das Leben des Universums ein ewiges tausendstimmiges Gespräch sei; denn in ihrem Sprechen schienen alle Kräfte, alle Arten der Tätigkeit auf das unbegreiflichste vereinigt zu sein. Die Trümmer dieser Sprache, wenigstens alle Nachrichten von ihr, aufzusuchen, war ein Hauptzweck ihrer Reise gewesen.... (I, pp. 106–107, my emphasis)

This seemingly euphoric moment toward the end of the literary fragment is placed into question by the language itself. Some observations are certain, and others only appear to be the case, as indicated by the verb *scheinen* (to seem or appear). Their names only *appear* to be the key to the soul of every natural body, and it *only seems* that they come close to uniting themselves with the incomprehensible. Novalis writes with more confidence, however, that their speech or pronunciation (“Aussprache”) was a “wonderful song,” and that one could certainly say that the life of the universe is an “eternal thousand-voiced conversation.” Returning to fragment 245 from *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*The General Notebook*), a principal component necessary for Novalis’ concept of *Poesie* is music, as he explains toward the end of the fragment:

245. *Music.* (...) *On the universal language of music. The spirit becomes free, indeterminately stimulated—which is so beneficial for it—and seems so familiar to it, so patriotic—that for this short moment it is transported to its Indian homeland. All love—and goodness, future and past are aroused in it—hope and longing. / Attempts to speak musically. Our language—was much more musical to begin with, and has gradually become so prosaic—so unmusical. It has now become more like noise-sound [Laut], if one thus wishes to degrade this beautiful word. It must become song once again. The consonants transform tones into noise.*” (p. 37, with my corrections and bolded terms my emphasis)

245. *Musik.* (...) *Über die all[emeine]n Sprache der Musik. Der Geist wird unbestimmt angeregt – das tut ihm so wohl – das dünkt ihm so bekannt, so vaterländisch – er ist auf diese kurzen Augenblicke in seiner indischen Heymath. Alles Liebe – und Gute, Zukunft und Vergangenheit regt sich in ihm – Hoffnung und Sehnsucht. / Vers[uch] bestimmt durch die Musik zu sprechen. Unsre Sprache – sie war zu Anfang viel musicalischer und hat sich nur nach gerade so prosaisirt – so entönt. Es ist jetzt mehr Schallen geworden – Laut, wenn man diese schöne Wort so erniedrigen will. Sie muß wieder Gesang werden. Die Consonanten verwandeln den Ton in Schall.*” (III, p. 285, bolded terms my emphasis)

Novalis traces the origin of music as the universal language to India—that in experiencing music the spirit returns to this home. He therefore suggests that the attempt to speak musically will bring one closer to experiencing the universal language. According to the teacher in *The Novices of Sais*, this is achieved by first gathering, organizing and meditating on objects in nature.

The language of nature comes from these objects as though sound figures inside of the body... eventually sound, light, and figures emerge that will make the language comprehensible. The *Trümmer* or “ruins” that the novices seek, as Ritter would also suggest, are inside themselves and must only be set into motion—then their pronunciation, or speech, will become musical again.

4. Conclusion

In *The Novices of Sais*, Novalis takes the characteristics of the sound figures and separates them into their distinct attributes; they are fragmented through descriptions of inner and outer light rays and sound, in turn representing the irrepresentability of *Poesie*, his ideal, universal language—the “true Sanskrit” of nature. Novalis makes the figures themselves more *tangible* by giving humans (and in particular poets) the power to create them via rows of stones and other objects of nature and by drawing lines in the sand—suggesting that the physical images in the outer world also produce the figures and sounds which should be perceived as a synaesthetic reaction from inside their bodies.³⁹

Together, Novalis and Ritter were longing for an absolute, universal language, and through their scientific and poetic investigations, the sound figures seemed to be the key to deciphering this language—they point toward the scientific expression, perhaps, of this original language of nature so closely related to music. This *Poesie* would contain its sound, writing, and meaning all at the same time; as in Sanskrit, there would no longer be a separation between objects and their names, nor humans and nature. Knowledge of the properties of Sanskrit and Ritter’s scientific and poetic narratives on the sound figures help shed “light,” so to speak, on the possible significance and meaning behind Novalis’ abstract and metaphorical use of them in his fragments and *The Novices of Sais*.

Acknowledgments

The content for this article has been derived from my dissertation, Smith., A. (2017). *Hearing with the Body: Poetics of Musical Meaning in Novalis, Ritter, Hoffmann and Schumann* (Doctoral dissertation) with some revisions and an important addition. This present article addresses the role of Novalis’ ideal concept of “Sanskrit” in his literary fragment, which I previously overlooked and adds a significant layer of meaning to Novalis’ and Ritter’s interpretation of the sound figures. It also corrects and further clarifies some of my early assumptions regarding the role of hearing in his text—not from the outside through the ears, as I argue in my dissertation, but rather as an expression from inside the human body—an inner hearing or “feeling” that then becomes the “musical pronunciation” of speech. The sound figures become an analogy for Novalis’ concept of the “true Sanskrit” of nature. This shows a significant influence from the early reception of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sanskrit studies by the western world on both Novalis and Johann Wilhelm Ritter’s work, however abstract and fragmented. This research project is a work-in-progress. Like Novalis, my subjective knowledge of Sanskrit is very limited, as I cannot read or speak it. From what I have read objectively, any true experience of the language must be subjective, like the teacher’s—it is otherwise lost in translation. Many thanks to the editors of the journal for their detailed feedback, and to Yasas Renn and Don Carrell for the helpful resources and our discussions on Sanskrit.

³⁹ Ritter, on the other hand, gives this power to composers, acknowledging their great responsibility and the possible positive and negative influences that could ensue.

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