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Beyond liberal Utopia: freedom as the problem of modernity

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This essay critiques the concept of the “punctual” or autonomous self that served as the foundation of classical liberalism and its moral philosophy, beginning in the work of A. Smith, T. Paine, and I. Kant. Grounded in the language of “rights,” personal liberty, and rational self-possession, the modern individual is paradoxically characterized as a unique agent and as formally equivalent to all other such beings. Furthermore, its political and epistemological claims rest on unexamined assumptions about freedom that would be severely challenged by the pessimistic turn of much nineteenth-century literary and philosophical narrative.

I feel ... an *obligation* to sweep away a stupid old prejudice and misunderstanding about all of us that has hung like a fog around the concept of the “free spirit” for far too long, leaving it completely opaque. In all the countries of Europe, and in America as well, there is now something that abuses this name: a very narrow, restricted, chained-up type of spirit whose inclinations are pretty much the opposite of our own intentions and instincts (not to mention the fact that this restricted type will be a fully shut window and bolted door with respect to these approaching *new* philosophers). In a word (but a bad one): they belong to the *levelers*, these misnamed “free spirits” – as eloquent and prolifically scribbling slaves of the democratic taste and its “modern ideas.” They are all people without solitude, without their own solitude, clumsy, solid folks whose courage and honest decency cannot be denied – it’s just that they are un-free and ridiculously superficial, particularly given their basic tendency to think that *all* human misery and wrongdoing is caused by traditional social structures: which lands truth happily on its head! What they want to strive for with all their might is the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all. Their two most well-sung songs and doctrines are called: “equal rights” and “sympathy for all that suffers” – and they view suffering itself as something that needs to be *abolished*. (Nietzsche 40–41)

“[Ladislaw] seems to me a kind of Shelley, you know,” Mr. Brooke took an opportunity of saying, for the gratification of Mr. Casaubon. “I don’t mean as to anything objectionable – laxities or atheism, or anything of that kind, you know – Ladislaw’s sentiments in every way I am sure are good – indeed, we were talking a great deal together last night. But he has the same sort of enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation – a fine thing under guidance – under guidance, you know. I think I shall be able to put him on the right tack.” (George Eliot, *Middlemarch*)

Honoring the ceremonial spirit of a plenary talk – viz., to offer a scenic tour of the conference topic and to identify some concerns that all of us may yet recognize as part of a shared intellectual and professional landscape – is no easy business these days. The latter in particular turns out to be rather intractable, arguably more so now than at any point in the roughly two centuries since the humanities began to establish their curricular identity and social purpose within the modern academy.¹ For in a profession as fragmented as today’s humanities – and I include in this characterization our own sub-specialty of Romantic Studies – an

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attempt at speaking *to* (let alone *for*) the “whole” of the field is forestalled by the pluralist ethos of critical inquiry today. On the face of it, of course, a profession dedicated to numerous discrete intellectual projects evolving on parallel tracks would seem to be the very embodiment of robust intellectual health. Yet complications invariably ensue once discrete projects are being pursued in apparent indifference to one another, with the result that “findings” or “arguments” subsequently advanced betoken more a transactional professionalism than a concerted response to shared problems and enduring questions. I note this susceptibility of pluralism to a kind of indifferentism because this very dilemma (if indeed one accepts it to be that) is itself a significant consequence of our modernity: viz., to have reinterpreted knowledge as the specialized, analytic reduction of complex phenomena into singular entities. That momentous shift, which first took shape in the methodological treatises of Bacon and Descartes and was further radicalized by Newtonian and Lockean empiricism, had recast knowledge as a quest for “certainty” (rather than for “truth” or “happiness,” as in a great deal of ancient philosophy).² Through its sustained parsing of phenomena into “clear and distinct” individual entities (human or otherwise), modern epistemology necessarily had to suspend the holistic, cosmological framework defining ancient philosophy from the pre-Socratics to Stoicism and early Gnosticism.

Curiously, the quintessentially modern conception of truth as the epistemological (rather than ethical) project of isolating singular entities as the only viable locus of meaning also turned out to rehabilitate the medieval Nominalism of Ockham and Abelard. In advancing “method” as the principal guarantee for the “certainty” of representation, modern epistemology necessarily comes to define itself as the science of special (“clear and distinct”) cases, of singular and emphatically disaggregated entities. Part of my interest today is to scrutinize the central proposition of this shift – namely, that meaning can only be found in singularities, since that axiom also informs (and undermines) the project of modern Liberalism. I will do so, however, by taking a thematically and methodologically opposed approach, namely, by making again the case for intellectual synthesis and so-called grand (though, I hope, not merely “grandiose”) narrative of a kind that, until quite recently, had enjoyed considerable appeal under the heading of “intellectual history.”³ Focusing on a handful of texts written roughly between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, I would like to consider how a certain strain of literary and philosophical writing ruminates the troubled and complex project of European modernity as it had begun to constitute itself since the early seventeenth century. Substantive ideological and aesthetic differences notwithstanding, the major voices of the nineteenth century (Goethe, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schopenhauer, Stendhal, Flaubert, G. Eliot, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, et al.) share a jaundiced, not to say outright pessimistic outlook on the master-tropes of European modernity: Reason, Method, Secularization, Progress, Commerce, Self-Interest, Individual Liberty and Rights, Emancipation, Professionalism, Institution, etc. Indeed, I contend that in its imaginative working-through of these tropes, nineteenth-century narrative can be found, both conceptually and formally, to be *skeptical* in an essential, rather than merely occasional or topical, sense.

Out of the tropes just listed, let me focus on the two most obviously germane to this conference: “liberty” and “freedom.” It has long been common practice to think of these two concepts as fundamentally different in their orientation and philosophical status, with liberty essentially denoting a political ideal to be realized through coordinated, rational, and progressive action, and freedom referring to a “natural” law fraught with metaphysical implications that one had better not look into too deeply; those writers that do anyway usually return with troubling discoveries. My argument today is that Romantic and post-Romantic literary and (some) philosophical writing of the above kind tabulates the costs of Enlightenment

Liberalism's principal failure, namely, to scrutinize its underlying assumptions concerning the nature of freedom and human agency. As a result, much nineteenth-century narrative exhibits a deep-seated and gradually intensifying pessimistic undercurrent, one that in a few instances (Schopenhauer, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche) rises to programmatic and, at times, nihilistic intensity. In various ways, the voices just mentioned anticipate more recent and controversial arguments by Adorno and Horkheimer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Charles Taylor, Hans Blumenberg, John Milbank, Alasdair McIntyre, among others – that consider the projects of Enlightenment and Modern Liberalism to have *de facto* failed, even as large sectors of the contemporary academy (including our field) “continue to speak and write as if one of these projects had succeeded.”⁴ (McIntyre 68). To proceed, let me outline some of Modern Liberalism's constitutive and, I argue, terminally flawed axioms:

- First, it proceeds on the premise of a solitary (or “punctual”), self-conscious, and “free” individual supposedly capable of interacting with other such individuals in a transparent, communicative, and purposive mode and deliberating on its own goals and projects without external constraints. The paradox here (and a principal focus of my presentation today) involves the postulate of an agency *unique and distinctive* on the one hand, and yet simultaneously considered *equivalent to and indistinguishable from* all other such agents. In his 1839 prize essay *On the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhauer identifies this paradox as the central flaw of modern theories of freedom; they fail to grasp that “every *existentia* presupposes an *essentia*; that is to say, everything that is must also be *something*, must have a definite essence. It cannot *exist* and yet at the same time be *nothing*, thus something like the *ens metaphysicum*, i.e., something that *is* and only *is*, without determinations and qualities, and consequently without the definite mode of action that flows from these.”⁵ Evidently unaware of Schopenhauer's text, Jean-Luc Nancy restates the point almost verbatim: “Freedom ... is the fact of existence as the essence of itself; ... existence as its own essence – the singularity of being” (11).
- Second, in supplanting normative frameworks with contingent interestedness, modern Liberalism posits moral neutrality as a possible, indeed indispensable way of being in the world. What, in a notably Burkean turn of phrase, Hans-Georg Gadamer some time ago had flagged as the “Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice” (273) involves a principled resistance to the legitimacy of “strong evaluation,” to borrow Charles Taylor's expression; put in positive terms, the modern self is defined via its aspiration to live unfettered by any unconditional, normative and evaluative commitments. An early version of this “naturalist reduction” (Taylor 25) can be found in Thomas Paine's peremptory claim that “every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated” (Paine 42).
- Third, Liberalism reduces the (Aristotelian) category of “action” (*praxis*) to a methodological question, namely, how to “implement” or “comply” with abstract propositions whose authority and cogency remain substantially unaffected by their material realization. Thus modern Liberalism no longer understands “practice” or “doing” as a distinctive realm of contingent experience; instead, action serves the strictly *instrumental* purpose of securing a non-contingent state captured by Nietzsche's acerbic image of the herd grazing in “security, safety, contentment,” reassured that “suffering has been abolished.” In pursuit of its speculative utopias, Liberalism dissolves action into behavior, that is, into the coordinated, bureaucratic, or habituated *implementation of a concept*. Social and material processes thus come to be seen as but the outward manifestation of a logical ratio of means and ends. Such *Zweckrationalität* (as Max Weber was to christen it) may present itself as the dialectical play of “interests” gradually civilizing the passions in the writings of the Scottish

Economists, as the abstract pleasure-calculus of Bentham's Utilitarianism and the harsh social policies deriving from it; yet, as we shall see, it also lurks behind Kant's ostensibly disinterested notion of "purposiveness" and the "moral law."⁶

- Finally, Liberalism's elaboration of modern, rational, individual agents as characterized by a single (universal) and hence fundamentally predictable template of "behavior" inexorably dissolves the boundaries of agency and individuality alike. For when transmuted into "labor" and "behavior," respectively, the Aristotelian categories of "work" and "action" are aggregated and tabulated by the metrics of modern statistics, social psychology, and probabilistic reasoning – conceptual and methodological innovations that helped realize the Enlightenment project of stabilizing social life in a set of "average" values, while sequestering contingency as a mere fluctuation of data.⁷ Yet as it is captured through disciplinary lenses of its own devising, modern individuality happens upon a model of rational and competitive, social processes essentially indifferent to the vagaries of personal desire and subjective intention. Modernity's quintessentially linear and progressive (rather than cyclical) conception of time paradoxically pivots on the non-knowledge of individual agency as to the deeper systemic and ideological processes in which it is caught up. Hence the emancipatory claims of Liberalism's neutral or "punctual" self make for an odd contrast with the concurrent emergence of systemic (dialectical) models of rationality according to which all historical process is necessarily opaque to the "natural consciousness" (Hegel) so vicariously advancing it.

Social "progress" such as growing prosperity, literacy, cultural refinement, consistency and transparency of the law, equality, liberty, etc. thus is not the product of individual, deliberate action, let alone won by an individual agent's heroic or virtuous commitment to received norms. Rather, it involves "gains" brought about by a wholly impersonal rationality that, by the eighteenth century, had been labeled "system" and, as Clifford Siskin has shown, "became the object that defined liberalism."⁸ What Adam Smith had famously called the "silent and insensible" operation of commerce characterizes modern systems broadly speaking, including those of such disparate thinkers as Malthus, Hegel, Marx, and Darwin.⁹ Let me again stress the historical paradox (of which we, too, are heirs): that Liberalism's punctual and neutral self, defined by his/her private interests, makes its appearance at the same moment that new critical models (e.g., mechanism, necessitarianism, utilitarianism, speculative dialectics, historical materialism) dispute the modern individual's capacity for timely and comprehensive self-awareness. This paradoxical trend is especially apparent in the widening gap between subjective "interest" and systemic "rationality." It also accounts for the concurrent flourishing of compensatory, intuitionist models of self-possession, such as the mid-eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, Rousseauvian *sentiment*, Pietism, and *Sturm und Drang* sweeping across England, France, and Germany, respectively.

Let me now take up the first of these points, the paradox of supposedly "equivalent" individuals. What prompts a major voice of modern Liberalism like J. S. Mill in 1859 to pronounce "mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind" (66) already finds programmatic expression in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). As "spectators of [their] own behavior," individuals in Smith's account constitute society as a fundamentally specular event. The social is an eminently *virtual* reality, fashioned by distilling from one's subjective sensibility an average behavioral template that can (in a strictly probabilistic sense) be imputed to other selves. John Milbank speaks of "Smith's notion of non-planned collaboration [as] a fiction of unrelated individual starting points – persons and properties sprung from nowhere" (41). To scrutinize Smith's projectionist logic is to discover that norms, virtues, and values are clearly no longer bound up with the intuitive certitude that

had characterized the Aristotelian concept of “action” (*praxis*). Instead, they arise as speculations about an “average” habitus and, as mere inferences, require further confirmation by the actuarial and probabilistic methods of the social sciences. If, as Hannah Arendt had argued half a century ago, the concept of the “social” has decisively “blurred the old borderline between private and political” (38), it has also become a source of constant psychological and epistemological instability. Hence, as Adam Smith notes, impartial self-examination is “the only looking glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (112).

Postulating that, at least “in the middling and inferior stations of life, the road to virtue and that to fortune ... are, happily in most cases, very nearly the same” (63), Smith posits society as a harmonized aggregate of essentially atomistic and selfish individuals: “Every man, therefore, is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man” (*TMS* 83). With revealing terminological imprecision, Smith thus shifts back and forth between the “impartial” and the “indifferent spectator” (83; 85). Comprised of so many indifferent or “punctual” selves (as Charles Taylor has more recently dubbed them), social space itself has become an extrapolated, virtual domain, rather than a historically grown and socially elaborated, empirical framework.¹⁰ Its evanescent, abstract qualities also explain why the quintessentially modern category of the “social” – so markedly different from the sharp division between the “private” (*oikos*) and the “public” (*politeia*) in Aristotle – can no longer compel individuals to support it as a positive goal but merely insists on the minimal condition of their compliance with the law.¹¹ Unaware of how a radical, atomistic notion of the individual “vitiates arguments for connections” (Ferguson 9), Smith proceeds to argue that, even though “society may subsist among different men, ... no man in it should owe it any obligation” (86). By positing individual liberty as ontologically prior and substantially unrelated to any shared norms, values, or virtues, Smith conceives of society strictly in contractual, institutional, and pragmatic terms. Its coherence rests not on a normative (Aristotelian) notion of justice and the good but is sustained only by the punitive *post facto* intervention of the law. As Smith concedes, without the specter of legal retribution, modern society cannot exist at all: “If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society ... must in a moment crumble into atoms” (86). While uneasily retaining ancient Stoic prescriptions as a vague defense against the more troubling consequences of a wholly disembedded subjectivity, Smith’s classical Liberalism ultimately grasps the self in actuarial and virtual terms. Thus the value of socio-economic practices is no longer defined by normative commitments – e.g., Aristotelian “excellence” or Stoic “virtue” – but by hypostatized perceptions of what is “generally agreeable” (116) and “by a desire of being approved of” or by “what ought to be approved of” (117).¹²

Smith’s paean to a “moderated sensibility” and a reflexively achieved “sense of propriety” and “self-command” (143, 146) is echoed a generation later in Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Yet, in a significant radicalization of Classical Liberalism, Paine short-circuits the entire neo-Stoic regimen of reflexive self-examination so central to Smith’s theory of the “impartial spectator.” Thus Paine simply asserts the equivalence, and hence the *de facto* indifference, of man as an ontological fact: “Every history of the creation, and every traditionary account, ... agree in establishing one point, *the unity of man*; by which I mean, that men are all of *one degree*, and consequently that all men are born equal, and with equal natural right, in the same manner as if posterity had been continued by *creation* instead of *generation*” (Paine 66). It is just this approach to political argument as a set of strictly performative and apodictic *claims* arising out of nothing that was to prompt Hegel to remark how “the reality which stands in the greatest antithesis to universal freedom ... is the freedom and individuality of actual self-consciousness itself.” The actuarial vision of society as a composite of

interchangeable selves and average modes of behavior had, of course, culminated in the radical, murderous phase of the French Revolution. There, Hegel notes, the “sole work and deed of universal freedom is ... death,” namely, when the universal will as “self-conscious reality heightened to the level of *pure* thought or of *abstract* matter, changes round into its negative nature and shows itself to be equally that which *puts an end to the thinking of oneself*, or to self-consciousness” (359; 360–361). Still, there is something beguiling even today about Paine’s pugnacious assertion of inalienable “natural rights ... which appertain to man in right of his existence” and which are said to differ categorically from “civil rights,” such as “appertain to man in right of his being a member of society.” The latter, Paine notes, originate in a “some natural right pre-existing in the individual” and only accrue to man “after entering into society” (68).

Within the unfolding project of political Liberalism, a radicalization has clearly taken place in the generation between Smith and Paine: first, the discourse of “rights” now appears as the centerpiece of a modern Liberal polity. In Paine’s account, rights are an immediate and necessary entailment of the natural/ontological equality of man. Yet this historically specific emergence of “rights” within modern political thought paradoxically takes the form of a non-contingent and seemingly incontestable claim *simultaneously advanced and legitimated* by the modern individual. That is, Paine alternately posits the individual as an absolute or (in his parlance) “originary” value *and* as the sole beneficiary of its own, performative claims concerning the “rights of man.” Here, then, performative self-enactment has supplanted the Aristotelian notion of practice as a way of being in the world. Implausibly, that is, action is thought as wholly self-originated and “presentist,” a mode of instantaneous self-realization or self-fulfilment. Related to this fantasy of total self-possession is Liberalism’s contention that “frameworks are things we invent, not answers to questions that inescapably pre-exist for us, independent on our answer or inability to answer” (Taylor 30). By contrast, Aristotle’s *Nicomachian Ethics* carefully parses “action” (*prattein*) as having moral significance only within a framework of existing “practice” (*praxis*): “Actions ... are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them *as* just and temperate men do them” (1105^b5). As Michael Oakeshott puts it, “the practical is not a certain kind of performance; it is *conduct* in respect of its acknowledgement of a practice” (57, italics mine).¹³ Oakeshott continues to argue that such an observation “does not reduce conduct to a process or impose upon it the character of a *mere* habit. Customs, principles, rules, etc. have no meaning except in relation to the choices and performances of agents; they are *used* in conduct and they can be used only in virtue of having been learned. Nor do procedures prescribe choices or substantive actions. A rule (and *a fortiori* something less exacting, like a maxim) can never tell a performer what choice he shall make; it announces only conditions to be subscribed to in making choices” (57–58). The latter point arguably eluded those who, like Paine, reject the very notion of a historically and empirically constituted, normative framework (custom, tradition, habit) as but “the manuscript assumed authority of the dead over the living” (Paine 42).

Secondly, Paine’s italicized characterization of man as categorically equivalent and indifferent (“men are all of one degree”) notably flattens out the supposed source and beneficiary of that very claim – viz., the modern individual. Paradoxically, that is, the individual in Paine’s text becomes a generic article or heuristic fiction. As such, it alerts us to an unsuspected antinomy between *liberté* and *égalité* that, as I will hint towards the end of my talk, was to preoccupy writers as disparate as Blake, Schopenhauer, Flaubert, J. S. Mill, George Eliot, and Nietzsche. Yet it is above all Paine’s eponymous concept of “Rights” that warrants our attention; for not only does it play a crucial role in the genesis of modern

Liberalism at the end of the eighteenth century but, even today, it constitutes an essential (if woefully unexamined) axiom in political and academic discourse. Some time ago, Alasdair McIntyre's *After Virtue* called attention to a logical paradox remarkably similar to the one vitiating Paine's concept of agency. In his critique of Alan Gewirth's *Reason and Morality* (1978), McIntyre thus zeroes in on one of Gewirth's central claims: namely, that "since the agent regards as necessary goods the freedom and well-being that constitute the generic features of his successful action, he logically must also hold that he has rights to these generic features and he implicitly makes a corresponding rights-claim." As McIntyre points out, trouble brews when we take it as an axiom that to identify certain "necessary goods" for the "exercise of rational agency" also licenses *eo ipso* the claim that we have "a right to these goods" (66–67). As McIntyre proceeds to argue, "one reason why claims about goods necessary for rational agency are so different from claims to the possession of rights is that the latter in fact presuppose, as the former do not, the existence of socially established rules. Such sets of rules only come into existence at particular historical periods under particular social circumstances. They are in no way universal features of the human condition" (67).

Though otherwise critical of McIntyre's Aristotelian orientation, theologian John Milbank has lent support to this particular argument by elaborating on the historical conditions that favored the emergence of a theory of rights and connected it with modernity's conception of individuality as self-possession. At issue is the seventeenth-century redefinition of the classical Roman concept of *dominium* – then understood as self-government and (Stoic) mastery of the passions but, by the mid-seventeenth century, recast as *sovereignty* (a term also prominent in Paine's writings). Under the heading of "sovereignty," the self emerges as its own possession and as the centerpiece of the new philosophical framework of "natural law" as it simultaneously opposes "theological dogma" and "state absolutism" (Cassirer 238). Particularly in the writings of Hobbes and Grotius, self-possession came to be presented as the most elemental or "natural" right of all. Consequently, *ius* no longer denotes "what is 'right' or just, or a 'claim right' to justice, but active right over property. As the traditional link between person and ownership remains, this means that self-identity, the *suum*, is no longer essentially related to divine rational illumination, or ethics, but is a sheer 'self-occupation' or 'self-possession'" (Milbank 13–14). It is telling that what renders Paine's assertion of non-contingent, universal rights so powerful (yet also so vulnerable) is precisely its refusal to acknowledge the specific historical moment in which it is embedded and by virtue of which it becomes possible. Indeed, an emphatic rejection of historical consciousness turns out a *conditio sine qua non* for any theory of rights. Beginning with Grotius, "the concept of the law as such is not founded in the sphere of mere power and will but in the sphere of pure reason. ... Natural law is not simply the sum total of that which has been decreed and enacted; it is that which originally arranges things. It is 'ordering order' (*ordo ordinans*), not 'ordered order' (*ordo ordinatus*)" (Cassirer 239–240). Firmly committed to this self-authorizing mode of reasoning, Paine's (and nearly two-hundred years later Gewirth's) assertion of the Rights of Man as an unconditional (if also strangely empty) "natural" fact is, however, substantially weakened by the absence of any corresponding notion of the good or *telos* to which the rights in question *ought* to be turned.¹⁴ As a neologism suddenly making its appearance in English political thought of the late seventeenth century (and dramatically flourishing) a century later, modern rights theory reflects Liberalism's virtual and performative (rather than concretely empirical and morally normative) outlook on politics; as a result, politics increasingly turns into a theoretical endeavor based on a small number of non-negotiable and (supposedly) non-contingent claims.¹⁵ As reluctant as we may be to admit it, Burke was arguably on to something when

indicting modern Liberalism as a recklessly speculative venture proceeding with nothing more than the hypothesis that some good will *eventually* derive from the acknowledgment of its abstract claims, even as no normative and practical notion of the good is ever identified *in the present*. For all its paranoid and extravagant rhetoric, the *Reflections* rightly questioned a mode of political argumentation that uses an inherently unverifiable claim (i.e., the concept of unconditional “rights”) to postulate a wholly abstract and ethically indifferent subjectivity as both, the sole owner, guarantor *and* supposed beneficiary of those very rights.

Of all the Romantics, Blake may well be the most incisive when it comes to grasping the individual as radical singularity. A consummate organicist, Blake understands individuality as wholly bound up with the “minute” interpenetration of idea and medium. Individuality is “expression” and nothing else: “Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely Appropriate Words, nor Can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution” (Blake 576); everything else, of course, is mere copying. Profoundly opposed to any conception that would understand liberty as the rational and elective *compliance* with an abstract form, Blake’s proto-Nietzschean image of the “strong Man [who] acts from conscious superiority, and marches on in fearless dependence on the divine decrees” (Blake 545) is bound up with the singularity of a “Vision” strongly reminiscent of St Paul’s antinomianism. Yet such a vision clearly challenges, perhaps even shatters any framework of collective responsibility and intelligibility. To assert that it is solely “in Particulars that Wisdom consists & Happiness too” (Blake 560), and that “to Generalize is to be an Idiot” is principally aimed at the modern notion of the “social” that has terminally blurred the line between private and public, economic and moral concerns. By contrast, Hannah Arendt notes, Ancient Greek culture understood “a life spent in the privacy of ‘one’s own’ (*idion*) and outside the world of the common, [as] idiotic by definition” (38). Yet Blake’s conception (*Milton*, Pl. 32) of “the Human Imagination” as “Divine Vision & Fruition / In which Man liveth eternally” actually is fundamentally consonant with Arendt’s understanding of the Aristotelian antithesis of public and private. For in enjoining us to “[d]istinguish therefore States from Individuals in those States. / States Change: but Individual Identities never change nor cease” (132) Blake is anxious to place public man on an authentic, distinctive, and inalienable foundation. The selfhood of the Blakean subject constitutes not the goal of its affective or economic development but the source of its strength as a public, spiritual, and artistic agent. Hence Blake’s affirmation of the artistic temperament as radically singular and non-conformist, far from conflicting with the classical ideal of the public as the locus of virtue, excellence, and meaning, directs its honest indignation at the manifest corruption and permeation of the public/private distinction by an opaque notion of the social such as “embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength” (Arendt 41).

Above all, then, art involves constant acts of strong, qualitative “discrimination” as Blake puts it in “A Vision of the Last Judgment” (560). Opposed to Whigs and Tories alike, Blake’s critique of Empire, Commerce, and Commodity-art ultimately rests on an extreme anti-rationalism bound to disquiet even the most sympathetic liberal imagination today. Yet, like Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s anti-rationalist arguments later in the nineteenth century, Blake’s aesthetics propose an alternate rationality, one that pivots on the radical contingency of the self as *essentia* and hence resists the Circe-call of instrumental reason, as well as the behavioral patterns of polite, commercialized culture and Britons’ increasingly actuarial and class-specific conception of public taste and sensibility. Not surprisingly, Blake’s “Song of Liberty” in *The Marriage of Heaven Hell* ties the achievement of genuine, spiritual freedom to the repudiation of precisely those tropes most strongly associated with

British “Liberty”: *commerce* (“O Jew, leave counting gold! Return to thy oil and wine”); *modern law* (“the son of fire ... stamps the stony law to dust”); *empire* (“Empire is no more!” [Blake 44–45]). Blake’s “Song of Liberty” grasps freedom as the spiritual contrary of the prevailing, strictly secular definition of “liberty” as the commercial and legal project of polite and commercial society and the modern nation state (or Empire). For Blake only genuine vision *is* freedom – realized under the aegis of strong (“aesthetic”) *praxis* rather than conformist (“social”) *behavior*. As such, Blake’s notion of freedom rejects the false opposition that modern (Whiggish) Reason has set up between oppression and emancipation, exclusion and inclusion, prejudice and rational transparency, servitude and rights. For all those generalizing, political-theory types of argumentation identify the generalizing mechanism of the “stony” Law as the cause of spiritual and political oppression, even as they incongruously retain the law as the sole venue for obtaining redress. Still, aesthetically no less than in his political and spiritual commitments, Blake’s (and, likewise, the young Coleridge’s) critique remained an exception largely unknown to an Enlightenment bent on the dismantling and disavowal of any binding “frameworks.” Liberalism’s central premise or, if you will, “naturalist fallacy” – namely, to suppose that “a self can ... be described without reference to those who surround it” (Taylor 35) – finds its most technical expression in Kant’s moral philosophy.

Far more than either the Scottish Enlightenment or the bourgeois radicalism of the 1790s, Kant’s transcendental approach shows him to be consciously invested in evacuating all social and historical contingency from the project of “a pure moral philosophy that is wholly cleansed [*völlig gesäubert*] of everything which can only be empirical” (Kant 2; trans. modified). What may well be the most startling claim in Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* can be found early in his text. Following a sympathetic nod to Smith’s “impartial spectator” (*unparteiischer Zuschauer*), Kant allows himself the following, categorical assertion: “a good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself” (7). Moving closer towards the most distilled expression of this thesis – a.k.a. the “categorical imperative” or moral law anchored in the twin concepts of autonomy and duty – Kant stresses that “moral worth depends” not on realizing an object but merely on the “principle of volition” (13).

Not only does Kant systematically exclude all consideration of interest, of comparative (“decisionist”) evaluation of means and ends, as well as any retroactive justification of moral value based on intended or actual outcomes. He also disaggregates the notion of moral agency from any normative good and from any empirically observable practice. What determines the moral status of an action is not whether it fulfils a normative conception of the good but, rather, whether its form is sanctioned by the transcendental framework that Kant himself has established. The only criteria admissible for defining moral agency are those having to do with the “form” of the will. Hence, Kant’s notion of “autonomy” effectively stipulates the formal equivalence of all individuals inasmuch as they are to be considered moral and rational agents. Yet, with morality thus being collapsed into a commitment to the project of Reason itself, it has become all but impossible to discriminate between truly principled action and merely conformist behavior.¹⁶ Though stubbornly committed to a utilitarian method and Enlightenment model of liberty more than half a century later, J. S. Mill thus notes with dismay how “in our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. ... until, by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow; their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or

properly their own” (Mill 61–62). While the sources for this predicament may be traced back to the early eighteenth century and the emergence of the “public sphere” (Habermas) or a notion of the “social” that “has conquered the public realm” (Arendt), Kant’s transcendental method certainly did a lot to prepare what Mill and contemporary novelists like Balzac, Flaubert, G. Eliot, Dostoevsky, and Theodor Fontane came to diagnose as the “narrow theory of life, and ... the pinched and hidebound type of human character which it patronises” (Mill 62). Thus, for Kant, human nature is strictly the contingent raw psychic matter in urgent need of being reconstituted as “thought” striving to give itself articulate, meaningful, and universal form. Prior to, or outside of, that pursuit, the empirical singularity of the modern self is but an irritant calling out for the remedial intervention of philosophical critique.

As a species of philosophical reductionism, then, Kant’s transcendental method embodies the late Enlightenment’s strategy of legitimating the modern citizen-individual through a strictly formal and abstract method of description. The individual agent’s legitimacy is determined by whether he/she “conforms to the moral law,” it being further stipulated that any moral action “must also be done *for the sake of the moral law*” (2; italics mine). I recall these familiar claims in order to distill some of the presuppositions and implications which that theory holds for the individual in modern Liberalism. Clearly, Kant’s concept of moral agency presupposes the universality of those maxims underwriting the individual’s discrete acts: “Acting from pure respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty, to which every other motive must give way” (15). Far from being naïve, of course, Kant is well aware that “subjective conditions ... do not always agree with objective conditions” and that “the will does not in itself completely accord with reason” (24). Yet to concede that the will “does not ... always do something simply because it has been represented to the will as something good to do” raises several questions that will take us to the metaphysics of “freedom” so studiously ignored by modern Liberalism.

- First, is an action undertaken out of a (Kantian) concept of “duty” and untainted by any empirical interest even conceivable? What would be its motive? What might impel anyone to conceive and perform an action strictly out of “respect” for the moral law, that is, solely for the purpose of satisfying the formal (*a priori*) criteria of “morality” Kant has set forth? Why act at all in that case? Put differently, is not all action by definition empirical and contingent? Does not the moral law identified by transcendental reflection ask for something akin to “compliance” rather than “action”? As Terry Pinkard notes, “since we could not be said to have an ordinary ‘empirical’ interest in morality if we were truly virtuous, what kind of ‘interest’ or motive could we have at all?” (59)
- Second, in cases “where the action accords with duty and the subject has in addition an immediate inclination to do the action” (10), how is one to ascertain that one is acting not just in conformity with but, positively, out of “respect” (*Achtung*) for the “moral law?” Would doing so not require an *ascetic* sensibility, a punctilious ethos of self-denial? As Kant himself admits, “it cannot with certainty be shown ... that the will is here determined solely by the law without any other incentives ... For it is always possible that secretly there is fear of disgrace and perhaps also obscure dread of other dangers” (29). The price paid for having substituted the modern notion of formally correct “behavior” for the classical idea of virtuous “action” is, in a word, “happiness.”¹⁷ If Aristotle had understood the virtues as “precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia*” (McIntyre 148), Kant just as emphatically identifies moral agency with “duty” – i.e., the commitment to a universal “principle of volition” and, if a conflict should present itself between happiness and duty, to choose the latter (Kant 8–11).

- Finally, can an agent impelled by a conception of “duty” positively *know* the maxim on which his/her action is premised? If not, would one not have to speak of “behavior” rather than “action,” that is, of a mode of being-in-the-world that is not so much consciously experienced and willed as it is the default value of an unconscious framework, an “ideology” in the sense that Slavoj Žižek speaks of it.¹⁸ Inasmuch as the satisfaction of Kant’s moral law rests on a negative condition (*viz.*, the *absence* of any subjective inclination or external compulsion), it is not only counter-intuitive but permanently unverifiable: “Who can prove by experience that a cause is not present?” (29).¹⁹

First articulated as the third antinomy in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s proposed remedy for these perplexities involves the supplemental concept of freedom. Yet that idea is bound to aggravate the central dilemma of his Enlightenment project, which posits the will as the catalyst of all moral action while, at the same time, severing any connection between the will and external circumstances or subjective inclination. Consequently, Kant’s notion of freedom involves a kind of auto-affectation; Kant here speaks of a “causality that makes it effective independent of any determination by alien causes” (49). Hence, philosophy “must necessarily attribute to every rational being who has a will also the idea of freedom” (50). Yet this claim – more a defensive move on behalf of Kant’s transcendental method than proof of anything – ultimately fails in that it seeks to infer an (ontological) “is” from an (hypothetical) “ought.” After all, the status of Kant’s key-concepts (“autonomy,” “duty,” and the “categorical imperative”) thus far had been strictly that of an “ought.” That is, none of these notions can *eo ipso* guarantee that, as empirical beings, we are actually capable of fulfilling that “ought.” Neither is it certain that by having a *representation* of the moral law we will actually feel compelled to realize what it enjoins; nor indeed can we positively know if and when we pursue Kant’s concept of “duty.” Hence, the freedom of which Kant speaks here involves the solitary individual’s formal self-determination, its articulation of the law by which one is to proceed – without reference to a normative good or to projected social values. As an intrinsically pre-rational instance of judgment, freedom in Kant thus names the individual’s capacity for making explicit its commitment to the project of Reason itself.

Yet as a formal endorsement of the Enlightenment project, freedom is but another name for the idea of “autonomy” already presupposed by all moral action. Kant acknowledges as much when he notes that “freedom ... [is] but autonomy” (49). That concession quickly leads to another, far more troubling one; for as Kant now acknowledges, “we could not prove freedom to be something actual in ourselves and in human nature” but “saw merely that we must presuppose it if we want to think of a being as rational” (51). And precisely there’s the rub: for if freedom constitutes indeed the ontological endowment of every human being, it must logically allow for the alternate possibility of rejecting or ignoring the project of Reason itself. With a view to St. Augustine, who had wrestled with the same problem, Hans Blumenberg thus notes that

freedom confirms the goodness of God and His work in every case because it wills itself; indeed it wills itself independently of its moral quality. But falling back upon the reflexive structure of the will, which wills not only this or that but primarily itself as the condition of its concrete acts of choice, only moves the problem a step further back: *The will that wills itself is only free if it can also not will itself.* Here rationality breaks down; reasons cannot be given for self-annihilation. (134)²⁰

Curiously, the dilemma surfacing here is precisely the one that modern reason had sought to eliminate: the problem of contingency such as it appears to be implied by the notion of “individuality” as a radical singularity – that is, as an agent enjoying only an ephemeral and

incomplete grasp of his/her motives. For his part, Kant can only describe the predicament in question but cannot actually solve it, since doing so would constrain him to admit that Reason itself is permanently circumscribed and besieged by the treacherous, inchoate world of the unconscious, of wayward drives, compulsions, desires, anxieties, and fluctuating motives forever blending with one another and deviously grafting their energy and aims onto officially sanctioned representations. Simply put, one's fundamental commitment to the project of rationality cannot be anchored in yet another instance of rational deliberation. Rather, Kant notes, such a commitment (if we make it at all) is driven by far deeply contingent and permanently obscure causes. Unsurprisingly, he prefers to divulge the bad news in the form of a question:

Why, then, should I subject myself to this principle [i.e., the categorical imperative] simply as a rational being and by so doing also subject to this principle all other beings endowed with reason? I am willing to grant that no interest impels me to do so, because this would not give a categorical imperative. But nonetheless, I must necessarily take an interest in it and discern how this comes about, for this *ought* is properly a *would* which is valid for every rational being, provided that reason is practical for such a being without hindrances. (51)

Liberalism's wishful notion of an enlightened, deliberative, and autonomous moral agent rests on metaphysical assumptions and implies commitments concerning "ends" that lie necessarily beyond what can be specified by the punctilious neutrality of Kant's formal-transcendental method.²¹ Freedom, it turns out, is *not* coextensive with rationality but, on the contrary, implies at all times an agent's potential (itself inaccessible to rational discipline) for ignoring or openly disavowing a commitment to rationality.²² As the radically contingent ground of reason itself, freedom emerges as a permanent constraint on the utopian aspirations of Enlightenment Rationalism and Liberalism. For in sharp contrast with the complacent, multiple-choice axiom of political liberty, freedom signifies the singularity of the modern individual in an altogether primal, pre-rational, and non-discursive sense. The exasperation of Hölderlin's Hyperion – "Freedom! Who can grasp the word – a profound word, Diotima" (3: 119) is writ large in Schelling's 1809 treatise on freedom, which acknowledges that "only out of the darkness of unreason (out of feeling, out of longing, the sublime mother of understanding) grow clear thoughts" (35). With his vestigially Gnostic conception of freedom as "a power for evil" (28), Schelling is only the first of several major philosophers to have shown Enlightenment projects (Liberalism, Utilitarianism, Cosmopolitanism) and their concrete political programs (electoral, legal, and economic reform, emancipation, liberation, Rights of Man, etc.) to be resting on terminally unstable foundations. An echo of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Schelling's famous characterization of freedom as the "irreducible remainder that cannot be resolved into reason" prepares the ground for Schopenhauer's *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (1839), Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), and Nietzsche's brilliant critique of the free will in section 19 of the opening book to *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).²³ Yet in the time that remains, I will use a series of short readings to index how freedom as the radical contingency and singularity of modern agency emerges in some canonical, Romantic and post-Romantic writing.

Nietzsche's acerbic passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* (epigraph) is but a particularly strident instance of nineteenth-century writing revealing the experience of freedom as a metaphysical burden, a point echoed by major studies of the concept since.²⁴ Writing in the momentous year of 1871, Nietzsche's erstwhile teacher Jacob Burckhardt remarks on how, "for two hundred years, people in England have imagined that every problem could be solved through Freedom, and that one could let opposites correct one another in the free interplay of argument." Yet the result has been "a complete disintegration of the idea of authority," as well as the apparent downward transposition of the "idea of goodness ... into

the idea of progress, i.e., undisturbed money-making and modern comforts.” Notwithstanding the universal, “merciless optimism,” he continues, “our assumption that we live in the age of moral progress is supremely ridiculous,” being constantly belied by “our vulgar hatred of everything that is different, of the many-sidedness of life.”²⁵ Burckhardt’s despondent summation – only “turpitude is immortal on earth” (*Reflections* 241) – is famously echoed by Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. For as Ivan Karamazov’s famous parable argues, Christ’s exemplary rejection of the temporal trappings of power and authority (“earthly bread”) “in the name of freedom and heavenly bread” only intensified the susceptibility of man to material and ideological temptation: “Now see what you did next. And all again in the name of freedom! I tell you that man has no more tormenting care than to find someone to whom he can hand over as quickly as possible that gift of freedom with which the miserable creature is born.” Just what it is that this vexing freedom consists of can only be inferred from the ways in which, according to Ivan’s parable, humans proceed to divest themselves of it: “give them bread and he will bow down to you, for there is nothing more indisputable than bread. But if at the same time someone else takes over his conscience – oh, then he will throw down your bread and follow him who has seduced his conscience. . . . For the mystery of man’s being is not only in living, but in what one lives for” (Dostoevsky 254). At a more abstract, philosophical level, Ivan Karamazov’s parable merely reiterates that the choice was never between the terrifying reality of humans as a predatory species and the Nietzschean “pasture-happiness” supposedly guaranteed by modern liberty, rule of law, and economic prosperity. For it is the latter dispensation that, as Hegel argued, brings the “terror” (*Schrecken*) of “absolute freedom” into full view and thus confronts modernity’s disembedded individual with its own unique and unfathomable singularity.²⁶ In rather more forthright terms, Hannah Arendt’s closing paragraph to *The Human Condition* draws out the central implication of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Burckhardt, G. Eliot, and a host of other eminent intellectuals; as she so laconically puts it, “it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think” (324).

Arguably, it is one of the main achievements of early Romanticism to have located tyranny not merely in the caprices and excesses of the ancient régime or the younger Pitt’s repressive domestic policies but, most particularly, in the oblique coherence of social conventions, customs, manners, and habits. In so doing, it revealed “the unapproachable freedom from which thought itself proceeds” (Nancy 17), a freedom that can neither be claimed neither as the ground nor as the object of instrumental thought. Consider Blake’s careful parsing of the false opposition between Bishop Watson’s *Apology for the Bible* and Paine’s *Age of Reason*, Coleridge’s brilliantly ambivalent rumination of “free will” in *Aids to Reflection*, Keats’s “negative capability,” or Hölderlin’s poetic image of “openness” (*das Offene*): in each case, thinking is reclaimed as a non-linear, non-instrumental, and strictly provisional essence of being (let us not call it a “process”) – an essence to be dis/covered by the singular being in question. Traversing permanently uncharted and unpredictable possibilities, freedom reveals (in Heidegger’s parlance) existence to be always something more than mere facticity, self-possession, certainty, or righteousness. Instead, as *ek-stasis*, “freedom . . . is that which, in thinking and of thinking, must, *simply in order to think*, tend in spite of everything toward a liberation as well as toward the very reality of the existence that is to be thought of. Without this, thinking would have no meaning. All thought, even when skeptical, negative, dark, and disabused, if it is *thought*, frees the existing of existence.”²⁷

Long before Freud was to make the point in his late work, nineteenth-century literary and philosophical narrative explore just how the infinitely complex textures of social life and religious culture serve to offer humans refuge from the terrifying enigma of freedom – namely, the radical contingency and singularity of the self eventually expressed by Freud’s

notion of the unconscious. Among the most astute analyses of a social and cultural matrix subtly denuding the individual of its inscrutable singularity and freedom is George Eliot's novelistic oeuvre. Particularly her late novels offer an abundance of examples, such as the following two from *Daniel Deronda*. Showcasing the powerful influence of Darwin's oeuvre, the novel's famous opening chapter at the gambling table in Leubronn offers us a decidedly unglamorous cross-section of Europeans, "Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian." Transfixed by the circular motion of the roulette wheel, those present betray "a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask – as if they had all eaten of some root that for the time compelled the brains of each to the same narrow monotony of action." Another instance of what the narrative sardonically characterizes as "a striking admission of human equality" (8–9) involves an archery meeting on the Brackenshaw estate. Really a Darwinian mating ritual enacted in genteel disguise, this cultivated soirée held in a "carefully-kept enclosure" showcases the stunning uniformity and consequent placidity of Victorian, upper-middle-class, female existence: "What could make a better background for the flower-groups of ladies, moving and bowing and turning their necks as it would become the leisurely lilies to do if they took to locomotion? The sounds too were pleasant to hear ... musical laughs in all the registers and a harmony of happy friendly speeches, now rising towards mild excitement, now sinking to an agreeable murmur" (100).

George Eliot's focus on female agency is hardly accidental, of course; just consider Flaubert's Emma Bovary who, like Anna Karenina, Effi Briest, and a host of other eponymous, female *névroses* of the nineteenth-century novel, has seized on emotion as the last remaining avenue towards self-possession. Yet that strategy of conspicuous sentiment, already equivocal and often treacherous in Rousseau's *Julie* and Goethe's *Werther*, has become a dead-end in Flaubert. Misidentifying freedom as "choice," Emma frantically pursues various forms of hyper-stimulation (sex and death being uppermost on her list) merely so as to evade her terminally secure and aimless, provincial existence by various means: "She longed to travel; she longed to go back and live in the convent. She wanted to die. And she wanted to live in Paris" (56); or (my personal favorite), "she conceived the idea of becoming a saint" (201). One of the most concise and thoughtful analyses of Emma's predicament can already be found – as it were *avant la lettre* – in Schopenhauer's 1839 *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will*. Separating from the very outset the concept of "liberty" and "rights" (which "only refers to an *ability*, that is, precisely to the absence of *physical* obstacles to the actions of the animal" [4]) from "moral freedom," Schopenhauer ruminates above all a single question, namely, whether "the *will itself* [is] free" (6). The customary appeal to the self-possessed and entrepreneurial individual of Classical Liberalism – viz., "I can *do what I will*" – hardly helps answer the underlying question, namely, "whether the will itself is free," or whether "you can also *will* what you will" (6). For the self-conscious individual to say "I can will, and when I will an action, the movable limbs of my body will at once and inevitably carry it out the moment I will it" is to define freedom strictly as "*being able to do in accordance with the will*." Such had been the dominant view of Enlightenment thought, as categorically expressed by Voltaire: *vouloir et agir, c'est précisément la même chose qu'être libre*.²⁸ Yet precisely here trouble lurks; for even as "self-consciousness asserts the freedom of *doing* under the presupposition of *willing*," Schopenhauer reminds us that "what we have inquired about is the freedom of *willing*" (14). Consistent with Liberalism's erroneous construal of human freedom as "multiple choice," Emma consistently mistakes wishing for willing. It is indeed possible, Schopenhauer notes, to "*wish* opposite things, but [one] can *will* only one of them, and which one is first revealed even to self-consciousness by *the deed*" (15). Emma's failure to understand as much reflects modernity's fundamental

loss of “action” (or “deed”) as a meaningful category.²⁹ Like the equally severe case of Frédéric Moreau in *L'éducation sentimentale*, Emma's life presents a wholly “negative balance sheet, the end of action in *ennui*” (Brooks 203).

The formal correlate of this psycho-historical decline can be found in the “studied irresponsibility” with which Flaubert deploys the *style indirect libre*, a mode of speech that “refuses to designate who is responsible for a given statement.” As speech is shown to have deteriorated into “cliché, belonging to everyone and to no one” (Brooks 194), action has not only been absorbed into “behavior,” but the resulting narrative turns out to be conspicuously “anti-novelistic” by converting its protagonist's terminal obtuseness into a frustrating reading-experience. For what supplants action is the mindless *implementation of a subjective attitude or desire* that is almost instantaneously shown to be empty. Consequently, Flaubert's novels forever “preclude turning fascination into knowledge” (Brooks 187). With nothing more than the hallucinatory and transient force of desire to sustain the bourgeois subject, it makes little difference whether the attitude in question is Kant's formal feeling of respect for the moral law or the wayward, psychosexual cravings and sensations so ubiquitous in Flaubert's prose. Indeed, few writers capture more effectively how Aristotelian *praxis* and its underlying, public and normative sense of a *telos* have been supplanted by modernity's autistic notion of a self defined via its exclusive *dominium* or “right” to access the fantasized, virtual realm of economic and erotic fulfillment. The price of a liberated and emancipated bourgeoisie is that it now has to confront the essential pettiness of its initial vision; having tied the notion of happiness to the eventual fulfillment of a fantasy rather than to the fulfillment of a normative good (*telos*) realized by present practice, life seems directionless, phantasmagorical, and replete with proto-Freudian neuroses and incipient despair that glance ahead to the existential parables of Kafka and Camus: “But to [Emma] nothing happened. It was God's will. The future was a pitch-black tunnel, ending in a locked door” (59). Emma's predicament is not that of a supposedly lively and distinctive imagination gratuitously snuffed out by the oppressive humdrum of small-town provincial life and a stultifying marriage. Rather, as her “choice” to marry Charles already suggests, her petit-bourgeois imagination itself is utterly banal and cliché-ridden, a storeroom cluttered with the titillating fantasies and desired commodities infused into her mind by her desultory perusal of romance literature (“deep in Walter Scott” [210]), Parisian weeklies, and jejune fantasies of religious rapture. Hence, as the self-styled “bourgeoisophobus” Flaubert takes pains to illustrate at every level of his narrative art, his protagonists do indeed “dwell in possibility” (as E. Dickinson had put it). Yet in so doing, they turn out to be effectively paralyzed as agents, not to mention the fact that the possibilities in question have themselves been utterly colonized and denuded by commercial culture.³⁰

The strain of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary and philosophical narrative that I have identified here today exposes the unresolved, metaphysical deficit of modern Liberalism. In particular, the writings in question show the Enlightenment unable to grasp the challenge posed by freedom to its self-satisfied, rationalist trade in non-negotiable and non-contingent “Rights” and its reductive understanding of free will as “multiple choice.” In drawing out these shortcomings, literary and philosophical narrative also highlights Liberalism's contradictory paradigm of individual agency – namely, as an abstract, indifferent, and generically rational “form” of behavior, and as a unique, pre-rational, and strongly evaluative being potentially capable of embracing or rejecting the project of modern reason. For Blake, Goethe, Schopenhauer, George Eliot, and Nietzsche, freedom is a challenge rather than a possession or rights claim; the challenge, however, cannot be rejected since it inheres in our very individuality, here understood as our singular, enigmatic, and inescapable *essence*.³¹ Weary of modernity's descriptive and disciplinary armature (e.g., statistics,

behaviorism, utilitarianism, quantitative sociology, historicism), which posits the individual as fundamentally determined by the social force-field that it inhabits (even as it paradoxically affirms that individual's "rights" to exercise free agency), Goethe and other major literary figures conceive of the social as but the catalyst allowing the self gradually to discover its radical singularity. Such a position, whose political dimensions were first set forth with cantankerous lucidity in Burke's *Reflections*, grasps character, temperament, sensibility as something akin to fate. Regardless of what name we may choose to highlight the distinctive and contingent nature of "individuality" (rather than treating it as a convenient abstraction), it is "free" only in the virtual sense of harboring diverse and potentially incompatible wishes, projects, anxieties, fantasies, etc. As Schopenhauer was to point out with forceful logic, it is only at the point of action – the very category that in modern Liberalism survives only in the fossilized (behaviorist) nomenclature of "compliance" or "implementation" – that the individual can ever achieve freedom – namely, by doing what, in fact, he/she only ever could have done and, in now doing it, giving rise to the possibility of eventual self-knowledge. If Liberalism's corresponding literary genre is utopia, its structural opposite is tragedy, and it is surely no accident that tragedy should have furnished the generic template for the canonical narratives oeuvre of Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, G. Eliot, Fontane, Hardy, Zola, amongst others.

Inasmuch as every individual must seek to cultivate the aesthetic and conceptual resources for articulating and grasping the fate of his/her own character, the challenge of freedom coincides with that of creativity itself. As Hannah Arendt had suggested long ago, freedom names the illimitable space of thinking where we can confront our intrinsic being. While confronting the individual with its own inescapable and singular essence, freedom also reflects the agonistic structure and hubris of a modernity that has precipitously isolated the concept of agency from any normative, evaluative, and public framework of commitments, obligations, and purposes. Put differently, modern freedom became a problem only when the Aristotelian idea of the good as a common *telos* motivating and coordinating the *praxis* of the citizen had been permanently suspended in favor of claims about the subject's "inner" states, dispositions, and certitudes. Notwithstanding Liberalism's efforts to the contrary, the individual's subsequent confrontation with its own, intrinsic freedom – that is, the enigma and open-ended interpretive challenge posed by its singularity – could not be resolved by means of apodictic claims, such as the notion that modern selfhood amounts to "sovereign" right or possession. On the contrary, freedom reveals the subject's singularity to be a life-long predicament, one that can only be ruminated and dramatized (though never solved) at the intersection between lived experience, active thinking, and imaginative expression.

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Notes

1. I develop this point in greater detail in "The Philosophy of Shipwreck: Gnosticism, Skepticism, and Coleridge's Troubled Modernity."
2. For an excellent survey of the transformation of philosophy by its contact with the natural sciences, see Cassirer 37–92; on the changing concept of happiness, see Vivasvan Soni's brilliant *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*.

3. For strong examples of intellectual history germane to the present essay, see Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), the essayistic oeuvre of Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), and portions of Hans Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1st ed., 1966).
4. McIntyre 68; from this illusion, he continues, "derives one of the features of contemporary moral discourse, ... the gap between the *meaning* of moral expressions and the ways in which they are put to *use*. For the *meaning* is and remains such as would have been warranted only if at least one of the philosophical projects had been successful; but the use, the emotivist use, is precisely what one could expect if the philosophical projects had all failed" (68).
5. As Schopenhauer proceeds to argue, "all this is just as true of the human being and his will as of all other beings in nature. He too has an *essentia* in addition to an *existentia*, i.e., he has fundamental essential qualities that constitute his very character and require only occasioning from without to come forth. Consequently, to expect a human being on the same occasion to act at one time in one way and at another in an entirely different way would be like expecting the same tree which bears cherries this summer to bear pears the next" (51).
6. On Weber, see Milbank 84–100; for Milbank, history can only be captured in the metastases of means/end rationality: "fully objective history (sociology) is *primarily* about economic rationality, formal bureaucracy, and Machiavellian politics. What lies outside these categories cannot be read as a certain distinctive pattern of symbolic action, but only negatively registered." As such, Weber's notion of *Zweckrationalität* is "teasingly ambiguous. "At times ... [it] is a mere matter of methodological convenience, at other times it is the dark business of our Western fate" (87).
7. On Aristotle's concept of freedom as "the presupposition of the exercise of the virtues and the achievement of the good" (159), see McIntyre 146–164; on Aristotle's concept of "action," see especially Arendt 175–247. Echoing Arendt's brilliant analysis, Milbank notes how "praxis, in the old Aristotelian sense, referred to a dimension of action which was categorically 'ethical' because it could not be separated from a person's essential being or character (*ethos*); it meant a doing which was also a being. It also implied action directed towards a particular end (*telos*), but an end immanent within the very means used to achieve it, the practice of 'virtue'" (161).
8. Siskin ("1798"), 25; elsewhere (Siskin, "Novels") Siskin extends the argument about the rise and broad ideological appeal of systems in England to the genre of the novel; on the changing conception of "system" in the course of the eighteenth-century philosophical and scientific inquiry, see Cassirer 8–16 and 37–45.
9. "The concern which we take in the fortune and happiness of individuals does not, in common cases, arise from that which we take in the fortune and happiness of society" (Smith 89).
10. On this shift, see Anthony Giddens 1–20, and my own reading of Romanticism's transmutation of the ballad form into pastoral elegy in Wordsworth's "Michael": *Romantic Moods* 191–225.
11. What Frances Ferguson identifies as a peculiar feature of Burke's *Enquiry*, also haunts Smith's *Theory* two years later; in both cases, the drift of their arguments "makes the impossibility of sustaining claims for a unified and unitary self seem, paradoxically, to emerge precisely out of their basis in individual experience" (9).
12. Smith would aptly illustrate Jean-Luc Nancy's contention that "freedom is renounced" precisely when "a process, ... an institution (technical, social, cultural, political) prevents existence from existing, that is to say, from acceding to its proper essence. Freedom is renounced in the exchange of this essence for the identification with the other" (17).
13. For a discussion of Oakeshott's theory of moral practice in relation to Wordsworth and Hegel, see my "'Immediacy and Dissolution.'" A thoughtful alternative to the prevailing conception of modern, secular, and democratic society – identified above all with John Rawls's theory of liberalism – has recently been articulated by Jeffrey Stout. For Stout, democracy's "ethical substance ... is more a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct than it is a matter of agreement on a conception of justice in Rawls's sense. The notion of state neutrality and the reason-tradition dichotomy should not be seen as its defining marks. Rawlsian liberalism should not be seen as its official mouthpiece." Like Arendt and Oakeshott, Stout also invests in the originally Aristotelian notion of practice as a *framework* (and tradition) rather than a merely occasional, performative "doing": "My conception of the civic nation is pragmatic in the sense that it focuses on *activities* held in common as constitutive of the political community. But the activities in question are not to be understood in merely procedural terms. They are activities in which normative commitments are embedded as well as discussed" (3–5).

14. As Milbank notes, “because it is rooted in an individualistic account of the will, oblivious to questions of its providential purpose in the hands of God, it has difficulty in understanding any ‘collective making,’ or genuinely social process” (14), something already observable in A. Smith’s notion of society as a merely incidental or occasional convergence of private interests.
15. According to McIntyre, such claims can only be classed as “one with belief in witches and unicorns.” For just as with these fabled creatures, “every attempt to give good reasons that there *are* such rights has failed. The eighteenth-century philosophical defenders of natural rights sometimes suggest that the assertions which state that men possess them are self-evident truths; but we know that there are no self-evident truths” (69). – The standard account of modern rights theory is Richard Tuck’s *Modern Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development*; for a fine recent discussion of natural rights theory and early Romanticism, see R. S. White, *Natural Rights and the Birth of Romanticism in the 1790s*, esp. White’s substantial introduction, 1–40.
16. “Modern political theory, following Bodin, Grotius and Hobbes, abandoned this Aristotelian notion of *praxis*. Instead, morality became increasingly a matter of inner will and conscience, while external action came to be something that might be legitimately ‘manipulated’ by the State in a manner that by-passed subjective assent. No longer was politics thought of as rhetoric and persuasion: instead it became technology” (Milbank 162); likewise, Taylor sees Descartes as “transpos[ing] *inward* something of the spirit of the honor ethic” and “mak[ing] strength of will the central virtue” (152–153).
17. The *locus classicus* for Aristotle’s discussion of happiness is, of course, his *Nicomachian Ethics*; see esp. 1097^b1 – 1103^a10. If his claim that “happiness ... is something complete and self-sufficient” still appears compatible with Kant’s notion of autonomy, Aristotle’s other criterion notably differs; describing happiness as “the end of action”(1097^b20) and stating that “happiness is an activity” (1100^a15), Aristotle consistently emphasizes the role of “action” (*praxis*) as the corollary of the end; an end (*telos*) can only be thought as something actively realized and not, as Kant would have it, as a merely formal accord of one’s subjective disposition with an objective maxim.
18. “[Ideology] is not simply a ‘false consciousness’ ... [but] a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence” (25).
19. Kant’s dilemma is poignantly modern and unimaginable to Aristotelian thinking; for the latter, “it is impossible to regard as essentially good the ‘good will’, or pure motivation, because until this defines itself in terms of external action, we will be unable to give any content to ‘goodness’ (Milbank 161). In an otherwise fine account of Kant’s moral theory, Terry Pinkard skirts the crucial question as to whether “action” is even a concept applicable to Kant’s moral philosophy. For to say that Kant’s “agent ... is determined by what ‘maxim’ she chooses to act upon, by what she subjectively understands herself to be doing (*even if such understanding is only implicit*)” (46; italics mine) begs the all-important question: is such “doing” still “action,” or does it merely constitute a type of adaptive or conformist behavior. Clearly, Kant’s insistence that a moral action requires not only compliance with the law but an actual doing “for the sake of the law” tries to safeguard against precisely this kind of equivocation.
20. The dilemma in question dates back all the way to St. Augustine’s early text on *Free Choice of the Will* (387 A.D.). Prompted by his interlocutor, Evodius, who wonders how a “free will that uses other things either rightly or wrongly ... can ... itself be included among the things that we use,” Augustine has to confront the fact that, as the catalyst or first cause shaping the individual’s spiritual destiny, the will would logically have to be non-transparent to that individual. Sensing the specter of determinism eventually highlighted by Schopenhauer (“Can you also *will* what you will?”), Augustine can only take a dogmatic approach here: just as “reason itself is included among the things that we know by reason ... we also use free will itself by means of free will” (St. Augustine 67); on this problem, see also Nancy, who remarks that “freedom cannot present itself without presenting the possibility, inscribed in its essence, of a *free renunciation of freedom*” (16).
21. What John Milbank observes as a feature of neo-Kantian method (in Rickert and Simmel) is clearly prepared for by Kant himself: “Values are described as ‘irreal’, and the term ‘good’ for moral value is avoided, precisely because of the traditional metaphysical implication of convertibility with *ens*” (77).
22. It is striking that this crucial point continues to elude (or meet with resistance in) in contemporary arguments on freedom; for an example, see Peter Bieri recent *Das Handwerk der Freiheit*, which tries to preserve yet again the jurisdiction of rational and deliberate reflection over the will: “When we decide, we influence our will. A decision involves the formation of the will [*Willensbildung*]

- by means of reflection. As a result [*Ergebnis*] of such reflection, the will acquires contours" (61; trans. mine). Aside from utterly failing to engage Schopenhauer's obviously germane arguments here, Bieri succumbs to modernity's characteristic illusion that thinking, reflecting, etc. are not themselves modalities of the will and, moreover, that they are not forms of action but merely prolegomena towards it. Bieri's dogmatic and obviously counter-intuitive claim that "the freedom of the will, we think, consists in being able to will something other than what we actually want" [*etwas anderes wollen könnten, als wir tatsächlich wollen* (79)] can only be sustained, however, if we confuse "willing" with "wishing." For, as Schopenhauer had pointed out so clearly, the will only reveals itself in action and never as a mere possibility. To suggest otherwise is to return to the Kantian notion of the autonomous individual – i.e., to the illogical idea of a subject at once distinctive ("individual") and generic (i.e., a purely "formal" operation of mind).
23. I discuss Schopenhauer in more detail in "The Melancholy Gift: Freedom in the Nineteenth Century"; see also Rüdiger Safranski 303–317; In sharp contrast to Kant's notion of freedom, autonomy, and duty, Schopenhauer's account of human freedom is impelled by the radically contingent singularity of the "will." Thus he critiques Classical Liberalism's concept of agency for its habitual confusion of "is" and "ought," that is, for persistently conflating *actuality*, which is deterministic and necessitarian in its operation, with *possibilities* such as any individual will happily entertain – albeit only *prior to committing itself to one of them*, which will turn out to have been the only course of action ever possible for that particular individual.
 24. Heidegger, Schelling; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, esp. 44–59; Peter Bieri, *Das Handwerk der Freiheit*, esp. 29–83.
 25. Burckhardt, Letter of 2 July, 1871 (*Letters* 143, 170; last quote from Burckhardt, *Reflections*, 103). In a late letter (17 March 1888), Burckhardt sharpens the point: "Democracy, to be sure, has no sense for the exception, and when it can't deny it or remove it, hates it from the bottom of its heart. Itself the product of mediocre minds and their envy, Democracy can only use mediocre men as tools, and the ordinary careerist gives it all the guarantees it can desire of common feeling" (*Letters* 225).
 26. Hegel, of course, only highlights the "bad infinity" of a freedom thought merely as the absence of all constraint in order to promote his own conception of freedom as the reflexive determination of substance as the universal; see Nancy 5.
 27. All thinking, then, is "'only' the putting into question of an affirmation" and "freedom is 'not the freedom of this or that comportment in existence: it is the freedom of existence to exist, to be 'decided for being,' that is, to come to itself according to its own transcendence" (Nancy 18, 23).
 28. Voltaire, *Traité de métaphysique*, 51; as Cassirer notes (250–251), Voltaire later expressly reversed himself, conceding that the will itself cannot be thought otherwise than as wholly determinate.
 29. Schopenhauer echoes Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics* 1111^b20–30; for Aristotle, "wish" and "choice of will" are different genera altogether, since a wish is solely concerned with an end (*telos*), whereas "we deliberate not about ends but about what contributes to ends" (1112^b10). – Noting the "general devaluation of human agency" in Flaubert's prose, Peter Brooks' reading of *L'éducation sentimentale* locates a strikingly analogous confusion in that novel's protagonist, Frédéric Moreau. As the novel explicitly states, Frédéric is "worn out, full of contradictory desires and no longer even knowing what he wanted; he felt an overwhelming sadness, a wish to die" (181, 185).
 30. Letter to Louis Bouilhet (December 1852), quoted in Gay 25.
 31. Appropriately, Schopenhauer's *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* quotes the short didactic poem, "Orphisch," from Goethe's collection *Urworte*. With brilliant concision, Goethe's lyric illustrates what, a century later, Heidegger had meant when speaking of freedom as *Dasein's* "being-free for the freedom of choosing oneself and grasping itself" (*Being and Time* 176):

As on the day that lent you to the world
 The sun received the planets' greetings,
 At once and eternally you have thrived
 According to the law whereby you stepped forth.
 So must you be, from yourself you cannot flee,
 So have the Sibyls and the Prophets said;
 No time, no power breaks into little pieces
 The form here stamped and in life developed.

Wie an dem Tag, der dich der Welt verliehen,
 Die Sonne stand zum Gruße des Planeten,

Bist alsobald und fort und fort gediehen
 Nach dem Gesetz, wonach du angetreten.
 So mußst du sein, dir kannst du nicht entfliehen,
 So sagten schon Sibyllen, so Propheten;
 Und keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt
 Geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt.

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