

# Romanticism and Conspiracy

## Bringing About the Past: Prophetic Memory in Kant, Godwin, and Blake<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 What follows are a few speculations about narrative form as interpretive practice in early Romanticism and contemporary criticism; if my miscellaneous remarks have a shared interest, it will be to tease out a conspiratorial logic in some philosophical, gothic, and prophetic narratives of early Romanticism, as well as in the critical models of textualism and historicism that claim to circumscribe the overall intelligibility of that period itself. More generally, I am pondering what it might mean that early Romanticism's habits of storytelling and our postmodern, critical narratives should appear to be motivated and organized by some type of a conspiratorial logic, one whose (already familiar) elements we might briefly identify as follows:

- As in any conspiracy, its critic (or analyst) disavows responsibility for its existence; that is, from the vantage point of those occupied with its critical articulation, a conspiracy is by definition always "elsewhere," specifically in the past. Such a premise effectively revives the New Criticism's faith in a formal-rhetorical analysis untainted by any logical or material presuppositions. Behind the figure of conspiracy, then, stands the dream of criticism as a form of revelation, a mode of producing knowledge indemnified from all charges of methodological complicity in the construction and articulation of its objects.
- There also exist conspiracies of a non-intentional kind, perhaps best known through Freud's account of the preemptive, counter-transfereential strikes launched by the unconscious against its impending, critical (dis)articulation. In such a case, the absence of intentionality -- and its eventual reconstruction (as the agency of the unconscious) through the work of analysis -- renders a conspiracy "subjectless" or transindividual. According to that model, it is precisely the incompleteness or dysfunctionality of an individual or a community that furnishes the symptom that will, in due course, produce its belated analysis. The alleged muting of an authentic historical understanding by the specious eloquence of aesthetic forms (amongst other ideological mechanisms) -- arguably the pivotal axiom of contemporary historicism -- exhibits striking parallels with psychoanalytic accounts of "trauma" as a conspiracy not merely located in the past but substantially defining that past as having preemptively conspired against its critical articulation in the present.
- In order to defend against (and thus overcome) the traumatic resistance of the past to its critical articulation, the present devises complex, counter-intuitive methods of reading ("against the grain"). Method and disciplinarity thus enact postmodernity's longing for salvation in specialized discursive forms and forums. However, in their almost exactly inverse reconstitution of those ideological obfuscations ascribed to the past, our critical methods of reading also tend to display a distrustful, even paranoid quality. Even so, such an aggressively counter-intuitive, and avowedly counter-conspiratorial, quality is

commonly hailed as confirmation of the enlightened, post-ideological potential of our critical present, and as evidence of great disciplinary prowess in our historical moment.

- Finally, this project of a critical reconstruction and overcoming of what has been called Romanticism's "aesthetic ideology" -- the "trauma" preventing a historical configuration from achieving a more valid (i.e., more reflexive) sense of its own historicity -- also reinforces the authority of its practitioners. For it allows us to glimpse, as it were "in progress," the methodological and conceptual agonies of the historicist critic martyred by the opacity of that aesthetic tradition. After all, it takes a heroic effort to reclaim the past by sustaining critical dissent from the symptomatic aesthetic surfaces deemed to have "conspired" so lastingly against a more authentic understanding of that past.

2 Much seems to depend, then, on our situating Romanticism's conspiratorial potential with some precision: is it strictly confined to the historical moment of its aesthetic output, or is it the coefficient of postmodernity's critical commitment to "identify[ing] and interrogat[ing] the . . . representational choices" (Levinson, 1989, 18) of Romantic writing itself? So formulated, the question of "Romanticism and Conspiracy" explored in this session begins to coalesce with that concerning the implicit cognitive limits and eschatological motives of criticism itself.

3 To hazard an admittedly elliptic account, let me begin by suggesting that Romanticism has given rise to, refined, and institutionalized two distinct paradigms of reading: the first of these involves reading as immanent, textualized practice; it produces knowledge in the guise of a spontaneous, unpremeditated, and irrefutable revelation and, according to a tradition reinforced from Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* (1816) to T. S. Eliot's late writings on Christianity and culture, such reading takes the crypto-Anglican, New Critical form of a hermetic exegesis of texts. Both at a technical and institutional level, this paradigm of reading reinforces its own, constitutive premise: that of the textual artifact as "life," something organic, inviolable, and sacred. Passing over the question of whether the rhetorical criticism of the 1970s and early 1980s amounted essentially to a sceptical inversion of the New Criticism's conception of faith as technique, let me briefly (and once again polemically) sketch out postmodernity's more pointed objections to the New Critics' ideal of Literature as a secular Scripture whose prosodic and narrative balance were to defend its essentially "fallen" readers against the impingements of a dis/harmonious world. I here refer, principally, to the challenge issued by Historicism, specifically its rejection of the New Critic's preemptive faith in the Scriptural strength of the poetic word.

4 In the view of the Historicist tradition originating in Spinoza, and extending via Herder, Ernesti, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer to the New Historicists today, any unqualified textualism amounted to a conspiracy (consciously or unconsciously) against the political and economic significations transmitted by that text, however unconsciously. The ideal of strictly immanent reading merely dignified the critic's apparent failure to search for, detect, and respond to the oblique social determinacy of the aesthetic in general, and the deeply encrypted referential activity of the Romantic text in particular. While opposing the New Critical paradigm of reading as a technique for recovering eschatological structures in vernacular and prosodic forms -- thereby contributing, in T. S. Eliot's formulation, to "the organization of values and [the] direction of religious thought" (4) -- contemporary New Historicism appears energized by utopian hopes of equal intensity. Characterized in memorably Schlegelian terms

by Jerome McGann as "the completed form of criticism" (1983, 56), this approach produces knowledge in the form of two, closely intertwined (liberal) utopias: that of a steadily advancing, "deeply-interpretive" and, eventually, all-encompassing contextualism and (my focus for today) the fantasy of retroactively liberating the aesthetic object from the "visible darkness" (to use Marjorie Levinson's Miltonic and Blakean phrase) of its own referential obfuscations.<sup>(2)</sup> Predicated on a set of heavily revised Marxist and psychoanalytic concepts, Historicist reading conceives of literature as an intuitive or unconscious knowledge that, being unbearable in direct propositional form, had to be encrypted in aesthetic forms specifically available at its historical moment, such as the affective concision of the lyric or in the inward vagaries of autobiographical narrative.

5

Crucial to the historicist project is its own, narrative unfolding of a dialectic between the critic operating "as [a] privileged, essential subject" (Levinson, 1989, 30) and the text, now gradually unraveled as containing its own (unconscious) other, one said to have been silenced by the self-privileging eloquence of the aesthetic. In opposing its own voluble narratives against the referential autism of the Romantic aesthetic, historicism effectively seeks to rewrite and change -- not the future -- but the past, a past allegedly forestalled by the (unconscious) conspiracy of the aesthetic ideology. For Marjorie Levinson such a "self-consciously belated" (1986, 12) critical practice mobilizes "our consciousness to cure the past of its objectivity: in effect, its pastness." Thus the "origin coalesces as a structure, one which is really, suddenly, there in the past, but only by the retroactive practice of the present" (1989, 28, 23). For Marjorie Levinson such a "self-consciously belated" (1986, 12) critical practice mobilizes "our consciousness to cure the past of its objectivity: in effect, its pastness." Thus the "origin coalesces as a structure, one which is really, suddenly, there in the past, but only by the retroactive practice of the present" (1989, 28, 23). Such a characterization, inasmuch as it reflects the New Historicism's perhaps excessive comfort with its present -- one "edified but not *changed* by its scholarly operations" (1989, 29) -- recalls Walter Benjamin's conception of historicism as caught in a phantasmagorical interplay of danger and redemption. His sixth of his "Theses on the Concept of History" tells us that "to articulate the past . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Th[at] danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (Benjamin, 255). And yet, insofar as the historicist's "image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption," historicism's moment of analytic mastery proves necessarily unstable. For precisely that past, Benjamin now argues, had already "carrie[d within itself the] temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (254). "Critique" thus emerges as a moment of interference between an intuitive commitment to "action" and an encroaching consciousness of one's epistemological abjection, because, in Geoffrey Hartman's words, "the field of action . . . includes the past: its relation to the crisis at hand." Thus perplexed, "criticism approaches the form of fragment, *pensée*, or parable: it both soars and stutters as it creates the new text that rises up, prankishly, against a prior text that will surely repossess it" (Hartman, 75, 82). If we understand historicist practice as instancing a postmodern, "messianic" longing, our current models of historicist and cultural critique cannot be taken (at least not without serious qualification) as the rational and conclusive overcoming of the representational surfaces customarily assembled under the heading of a "romantic aesthetic

ideology." What follows is an attempt to offer this needed qualification by showing how the opposition between an aesthetic ideology said to lure its subjects into a consumptive suspension of disbelief and a postmodern, cultural and historicist critique committed to salvaging the past from what Kant had already called its "self-incurred minority" (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*) is itself a constitutive feature of Romantic narrative. What undermines the opposition (and, along with it, the redemptive aspirations of contemporary academic criticism) is the fact that the philosophical, fictional, and prophetic narratives of the late eighteenth century already relied on precisely the conspiratorial logic of intellectual production which was subsequently mobilized as a means of overcoming the period's "aesthetic ideology." Here, then, are a few examples.

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My first case in point involves the ambiguous temporal logic prevailing in Blake's early prophecies, books whose commitment to "illumination" is informed by the alleged spiritual and political oppression said to have issued from Albion's "past" and by the writer's hope for a retroactive "correction" or "redemption" of that past from the "ninefold darkness" of priestcraft, tyranny, and reason. Recent historicist work has drawn our attention to the often inextricable lines of division between the eschatological beliefs of London's millenarian, mostly artisan communities during the 1780s and 1790s, and the fervent rationalisms of intellectuals like Paine, Priestley, Thelwall, Spence, or Godwin.<sup>(3)</sup> Blake's *Book of Urizen* frames this antagonism as one between faith and law, between the radical antinomian "energy" of the present and the oppressive traditionalism of the state and state-religion, as well as the implacable rationalism perceived to have dominated the opposition to these institutions. Such ideological tensions ultimately converge in the rhetorical tension between prophetic "words articulate, bursting in thunders" and "the Book / Of eternal brass, written in . . . solitude (Copy D, Plate 4a, lines 4, 32-3. All text references are to Copy D of *Urizen*, but the engravings seen below are from Copy G of *Urizen*, so both are cited where necessary). Consequently, Blake's early prophetic books offer themselves as the contrary of these oppositions by continually shifting back and forth between implementing belief as an unconditional intuition and critically reflecting on a past now understood to have significantly shaped the emergence of all beliefs. Blake's Lambeth books predict no plausible or fantasized future, nor do they aim to recover some empirical past. Instead, their mesmerizing visual and rhetorical patterns urge readers to "illuminate" (or "retroactivate") a past that has not yet been lived and experienced precisely because it was occluded from vision by the dullness of empirical memory and repressed sensuality. Much like contemporary critiques of ideology, that is, Blakean prophecy seeks not to predict a determinate future but to respond to the false determinacy of the past. Put differently, it seems intent on recovering an as yet unrealized, imaginative past from the one that had usurped its place and that had gradually reproduced itself through the oppressive psycho-political institutions of memory, morality, and state-sponsored art. Blake's *Book of Urizen* gives vivid expression to this conflict in the recurrent motif of division (*Urizen*, Copy D, Plate 10; copy G, Plate 13: Double-click each picture to see at full size and high resolution):

Figure 1: *The Book of Urizen* Copy G, Plate 13





Blake's focus on division further includes Urizen's fragmentation of eternity into history ("dividing / The horrible night into watches" [Copy D, Plate 9, lines 9-10]) and Los's agonized recollection of eternity ("White as the snow on the mountains cold") now rapidly consumed by general "Forgetfulness, dumbness, necessity!" (Copy D, Plate 10, lines 23-4). Exaggerating Urizen's instinctual fear of the "myriads of Eternity" contained in everything particular, Blake rewrites received myths of creation and rationalist theories of progress in precise accordance with the defensive and pathologizing attitude toward the body which these accounts had once inaugurated. Sensual, embodied humanity can now be remembered only *a fortiori*, that is, as the physiological torment of birth and aging, with Blake's text here recalling the skeletal figure of Copy D, Plate 7; Copy G, Plate 10:

Figure 2: *The Book of Urizen*, Copy G, Plate 10

A vast Spine writh'd in torment  
 Upon the winds; shooting pain'd  
 Ribs, like a bending cavern  
 And bones of solidness, froze  
 Over all his nerves of joy.  
 And a first Age passed over,  
 And a state of dismal woe.  
 (Copy D, Plate 9, lines 37-43)



To the prophetic voice of Blake's *Book of Urizen*, the past always begs to be redeemed from the mythic involutions of its own unconscious. And yet, to attempt such a redemption is to repeat the very Urizenic project of dominating eternity which, the prophet's voice tells us, had produced the aesthetic and political horrors of our empirical history to begin with. This paradox manifests itself formally in Blake's non-perspectival portrayal of iconic figures gazing into the void of historical time and becoming conscious of the past's ineffable monstrosity. Furthermore, the pivotal division of eternity into two distinct states, embodied by Los and Urizen, also casts doubt on the ultimate desirability of historical knowledge. For the intellectual capital of such "knowledge" would almost certainly lead to the resurgence of a (Urizenic) unconscious within ourselves, implacably conspiring against the infinity and integrity of our spiritual intuitions. Given our inescapable implication in the Urizenic terror unfolding from the past and still "surging sulphureous / Perturbed Immortal mad raging" (Copy D, Plate 7, lines 4-5; Copy G, Plate 10), the utopian overcoming of history through its completion as critical "knowledge" is no longer possible.

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And yet, even in a world, like Hamlet's, where the pale cast of thought has seemingly corroded the individual's native hue of resolution, all is not lost; for Blake's idea of the book is itself an attempt to mobilize what Walter Benjamin was to call our "*weak* Messianic power," that is, the materially and spiritually vivid illumination of a catastrophic history which, *from its very beginning and by virtue of that beginning*, has compromised all means for our recovery from

it. To grasp that inescapable "nexus of guilty life" (*der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen* -- a phrase defining what Benjamin understood as myth and what we may call ideology -- is to contemplate, actively and imaginatively, a past of which we, our curiosity, and our expressive capabilities are all joint (and irremediably corrupt) effects; Plate 14 in Copy D (16 in Copy G) of Blake's *Book of Urizen* dramatizes that moment:

**Figure 3: *The Book of Urizen*, Copy G, Plate 16**

Thus the eternal prophet was divided  
 Before the death image of Urizen  
 For in changeable clouds and darkness  
 In a winterly night beneath  
 The Abyss of Los stretch'd immense  
 And now seen now obscured to the eyes  
 Of Eternals the visions remote  
 Of the dark separation appear'd.  
 As glasses discover Worlds  
 In the endless Abyss of space  
 So the expanding eyes of Immortals  
 Beheld the dark visions of Los,  
 And the globe of life trembling.



Most vividly, Plate 6 (Plate 9, Copy G) depicts Los, "Groaning! gnashing! groaning!" over his own "wrenching apart" and defeating his arms' desperate attempt at preserving his bodily integrity:

**Figure 4: *The Book of Urizen*, Copy G, Plate 9**



Blake here again illustrates the primordial crisis (Grk. *krinein* = division) already imaged so luminously on [Plate 13](#). It is the vivid illumination of a mind traumatically divided ("rifted with direful changes") between the vivid, and often oppressive experience of its historical existence -- a quasi-Burkean past choked with the implacable moral law of tradition -- and the anxious and almost certainly doomed quest for techniques capable of rendering that past existence intelligible and thereby ensuring our survival. Appropriately enough, the plate's iconic force -- reminiscent of non-perspectival medieval representations -- grows out of the violent contrast between the "depthless" *Gestalt* of Los trapped "in dreamless night" and his

gaze of catastrophic expectation (reinforced by the toothless, seemingly disfigured mouth). Specifically his eyes show Los craving nothing so much as perspective and distance on "formless unmeasurable death." Blake's figure, which utterly dominates the plate, strikingly anticipates Walter Benjamin's account of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the "angel of history:" "His eyes are staring, his mouth is open[.] . . . His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm . . . irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (1968, 258). In Blake, as in Benjamin, the image itself offers the most vivid and forceful "perspective" on a conflict or interference which it also embodies or "illuminates" that between a fantasized, authoritative and conclusive mode of historical cognition and the abject intuition that any intellectual promise of epistemological self-sufficiency inevitably resurrects the nefarious (Urizenic) forces of history from which it was purported to redeem us. The images of Blake, in other words, are anti-classical and, in the best sense of the word, postmodern, for they articulate a purposely oblique (depthless) pathos. That is, they no longer conceive "pathos" as the timeless verity of a self transfigured in the semblance (*Schein*) of the aesthetic; instead, they "illuminate" pathos as the moment of catastrophic recognition that no mere image (or concept, or critical narrative) will *ever* reconstitute the spiritual and cognitive equilibrium whose loss they themselves dramatize with such intensity. Analogously, Benjamin's ninth thesis -- itself but "the written space of a contradiction" -- offers a fleeting glimpse of history as the source of a wholly new kind of pathos, the suffering of a subject "who is denied the image as a place of repose or as an icon blasted out of the past" (Hartman, 77, 78).

8

My second example of the curious affinity between Romantic fictional and disciplinary constructs and what Paul Smith has analyzed as a "kind of 'meta-paranoia' [underlying the] humanist practice" (97) of contemporary historicism, involves Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). Believing himself persecuted by Falkland's "eye of Omniscience" whose unrelenting gaze Caleb's invasive behavior had so artfully courted, Caleb concedes that "my sensations [in London] at certain periods amounted to insanity" (316). The novel's original ending heightens our sense of the plot's undecidability by observing how Falkland's fetishistic attachment to "his reputation" as something to remain "for ever inviolate" curiously "harmonized with the madness of my soul" (339). Precisely this paranoid lucidity prompts Caleb -- terminally imprisoned both by material walls and by his own, unconfessed compulsions -- to embark on writing the very story of his life now available to us as *Caleb Williams*, the novel. Drawing sustenance to the very end from the negative fantasy of his unending persecution and impending destruction, Caleb notes: "I feel now a benumbing heaviness, that I conceive to have something in it more than natural. I have tried again and again to shake it off. I can scarcely hold my pen. Surely -- surely there is no foul play in all this. My mind misgives me. I will send away these papers, while I am yet able to do so" (345). Thus Caleb winds up his account by reinforcing once more the very conspiratorial affect that we encounter in the book's familiar opening paragraph: "My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity. I have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny . . ." (5). And if Caleb the protagonist concludes his tale of woe by furnishing Caleb the narrator with his conspiratorial hypothesis, the latter's first-person voice in turn reproduces a self-confirming logic plotted (once again in advance) by the author himself. Thus Caleb's opening, subtly equivocal assurance that "my story will, at least, *appear* to have that consistency which is seldom attendant but upon truth" (5), echoes

Godwin's 1832 account of the composition of *Caleb Williams*: "I felt that I had great advantage in . . . carrying back my invention from the ultimate conclusion to the first commencement of the train of adventures upon which I proposed to employ my pen. An entire unity of plot would be the infallible result; and the unity of spirit and interest in a tale truly considered, gives it a powerful hold on the reader, which can scarcely be generated with equal success in any other way" (349-50). Writing one's own story thus amounts to a compulsive and hermetic game of *fort/da*, an elaborate attempt at reasserting symbolic governance over a reality intuitively grasped as utterly inchoate and in need of symbolic condensation. The novel's tightly wrought plot achieves precisely that control by neatly balancing the negative romance of Caleb's persecution of, and eventually by, Falkland against Caleb's (and Godwin's) narrative enthrallment of their readership. Just as Caleb's decision to set himself "as a watch upon my patron" induces in him "a new state of mind" -- "watchful, inquisitive, suspicious, full of a thousand conjectures as to the meaning of the most indifferent actions" (112-13, 128) -- so Godwin's authorial conduct of "employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive" of his subjects caused him to feel "in a high state of excitement" during the composition of his book (351, 350). In a deceptively straightforward manner, the novel thus develops Caleb's professed innocence and Falkland's alleged corruption as two mutually discrediting metonymic series, the one compulsive and the other premeditated. Such a design effectively baits the reader's analytic proclivities by hinting regularly at the symptomatic quality of either protagonist's behavior. The conspiracy at issue, then, is not contained in the text but perpetrated by it; for no matter how thorough our interpretive industry, the vigilant logic undergirding *Caleb Williams* will ultimately defy all closure precisely because it had baited the analytic industry meant to produce such closure in the first place. To that end, the novel repeatedly "plants" evidence in the form of countless "mysterious fatalities" and "instantaneous impulse[s]" of character and circumstance, details designed to instill in the reader an (illusory) consciousness of analytic mastery that will eventually be dismantled by the book's political and psychological developments. Recalling, nearly forty years later, his excited state of mind during the composition of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin tells us how he had resolved to "write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader, that no one, after he has read it, shall ever be exactly the same man that he was before" (350).

9

That same, utterly transformative ambition harbored and so defiantly asserted by Godwin and Blake also undergirds Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the last example to be considered here. Again, the stated goal (and the intellectual hypothesis) of the narrative is that it, the text, will constrain the audience to reconceive its cognitive relationship to phenomena ostensibly external to the subject. Kant thus opens his argument not with an outright rejection of the concept of "experience" but with the curious hypothetical statement that "experiential knowledge might quite possibly be already something composite (*ein Zusammengesetztes*) of what we receive by way of intuition and of what is spontaneously furnished by our cognitive faculties (*Erkenntnisvermögen*), an additive (*Zusatz*) that we cannot distinguish from the basic matter [of experiential data] until extended practice has drawn our attention to this circumstance and has schooled us to make discriminations in this manner" (1787 version "B," 1-2; translation mine). In this introductory sentence, Kant offers two, mutually confirming claims: first, that the possibility of knowledge rests on something logically prior to the deceptive primacy of experiential data and, also, prior to our intuitive mechanisms for the reception of such data; and, second, that in order to grasp such a counter-intuitive theory of knowledge, we must effectively abandon all hope for speedy proof and submit to the "extended discipline" (*lange Übung*) of transcendental reflection. Not surprisingly, Kant's *Critique* offers

itself as the best or, in any event, the only manual for such mental calisthenics. In other words, he ". . . *constructs* theoretical entities that serve his purpose. There is no empirical confirmation of Kant's hypothesis, however, since what counts as experience, and also as confirmation, is created by our acceptance of that hypothesis" (Rosen, 25).

10

Kant's concept of experience as grounded in an imperceptible synthesis of our intuitive and conceptual powers will yet have to confront its ultimate, repeatedly deferred presupposition: whether to view mind itself strictly as one more *effect* of this synthetic transcendental apparatus or, alternatively, to argue that mind (as "pure self-consciousness") actually governs this synthesis itself *a priori*. Recognizing that his term "transcendental" has been functioning in ways virtually indistinguishable from "hypothetical," Kant calls the question: does mind exercise rational governance over "its" representations (including those of "itself"), or is it merely a contingent and logically belated effect of its own subterranean synthetic activity? Given the apparent impossibility of justifying a project whose internal organization rests on our acceptance of a hypothesis about matters *prior to experience* -- thereby precluding all verification or falsification by experience -- Kant introduces a new type of pre-conscious symbolization in order to ensure both, the self-conscious integrity of the philosophical subject known as "apperception" and the rationality and legitimacy of its representations as knowledge. This symbolic activity is introduced under the name "schematism" and is further characterized as a "product and, as it were, a monogram, of pure *a priori* imagination, through which . . . images themselves first become possible." Posited as the hidden capstone for Kant's analytic edifice, however, this schematism -- troped with such revealing poignancy as a "monogram" -- must perforce remain inscrutable and indemonstrable.<sup>(4)</sup> As Kant notes, "in its application to appearances and their mere form, . . . [the schema is] an art concealed in the depth of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to uncover, and to have open to our gaze" (183). Like Blake's Urizen, that cocooned embodiment of Reason, the Kantian schema instances the ultimate presupposition that is philosophy: that of the ceaselessly suspicious yet allegedly "pure" character of thought itself -- a "silent activity / Unseen in tormenting passions; / An activity unknown and horrible; / A self-contemplating shadow / In enormous labours occupied" (Blake, *Book of Urizen*, Plate 3, lines 17-22). In Kant's transcendental theory, then, all justification is necessarily internal, a metonymic chain of hypotheses that, by virtue of their repeated usage as pseudo-explanations, congeal into valid components of what Kant calls "transcendental reflection." Having charged all possible experience with conspiring to claim independence when, in fact, it is utterly incapable of representing itself, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* seeks to remedy the situation by offering its own hypothetical account as a logically viable answer to this conundrum. Kant's answer comes in the form of something he calls "transcendental schematism," a subterranean synthetic activity designed to restore the epistemic coherence of the subject and its world from which Kant's argument, until just now, had taken such pains to estrange us. The kind of conspiratorial hermeneutics here at issue has been described as "a method for begging the question on a grand scale," which is to say, a "method for proving things, independent of empirical appeals, by demonstrating that they are self-evidently presupposed by what is (supposedly) self-evident" (Herrnstein-Smith, 128).

11

The larger question to be addressed by the study of social and cultural history (of which romantic studies is a vital part) is how to respond to a past that has defined the rhetorical, disciplinary, and institutional mechanisms which the historical positivism in the last century and the New Historicism in ours have been devising in the vain hope of transcending that past.

To redeem the past either through exhaustive contextualization or by articulating its contradictions through a "self-consciously belated" hermeneutics of disbelief is ultimately to take the bait of hypothetical narratives that rose to prominence in an age of rapidly collapsing revolutionary ideals. The question, I suspect, is more than "academic," and answers to it will have to be larger in scope than can be hoped for from "disciplinary" adjustments, nor is an imaginative response to the problem of historical knowledge likely to be found in a hyper-professionalization of academic practice or in the languid anti-professional ruminations of a so-called "experimental critical" writing. Given the postmodern intuition that the past conspired in the manufacture and transmission of the very intellectual methods and institutions through which we might attempt to comprehend and redeem it, criticism ought, perhaps, to be written in a spirit of ironic dedication. For when the study of history has exhausted its disciplinary resources -- having recognized them, finally, as effects produced by the very object of its study: the past -- the question of criticism will not be merely intra-institutional (in which form it could always be "solved" by following curricular and methodological paths of our own devising) but ethical. We may thus conceive of criticism in terms of ethics rather than technique, a mode of thinking, teaching, and writing always obligated to reflect on (though never able to indulge in) the seduction of methodological and narrative closure. For any attempt to reify the past in purely discursive and conceptual form invariably loses all perspective or "distance" on the ideological dynamics of the present in which such belated "knowledge" is being produced and circulated. As Lee Patterson has put it, "[t]o apply the conditions of our scholarship to life is an almost inevitable transaction, but it in fact denatures, because it dematerializes, our historical existence. Indeed, the lines of influence ought really to run the other way, from our lives to our scholarship" (63).

12

The remarkable collusion between the cultural output of Romanticism -- in the broader sense of European cultural history as it unfolds between the later eighteenth and the mid- nineteenth century -- and the historicist methods committed to identifying and resolving the enigmas and antagonisms of that output suggests that one of the motives encoded in the formal and material practices of the Romantic aesthetic involved the emergence of "criticism" (and its institutional forums) as a desirable and legitimate "supplement" to that aesthetic. Given the logic of Romanticism's critical, fictional, and prophetic narratives examined earlier, the project of a belated, "critical" articulation of Romanticism's allegedly "symptomatic" (or "aesthetic") ideology may, in fact, constitute but a repetition, a supplemental effect of that very symptom. In reconsidering our present technologies of critical knowledge as having been shaped, *a fortiori*, by the very culture which these technologies hope to possess in conceptual and disciplinary form, we may not only accept but, perhaps, welcome Schlegel's distinction between criticism as a form of intellectual conquest ("a laborious game of dice with hollow phrases") and as the reflexive experience of the Idea, that "continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts." Romanticism, we find, is an "idea" just in the spirit of Schlegel's definition: "An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony" (33, *Athenaeum* # 121). Schlegel's concept of irony thus throws into relief the undecidable place of "criticism" (*Kritik*): can it legitimately hope to correct (retroactively, as it were) Romanticism's ideological entanglements, or is that period distinguished by having bequeathed us the irony of a critical enterprise vacillating between a quest for conceptual and methodological authority and a reflexive understanding of that quest as an impossible one? Simultaneously elated and disillusioned, that is, we may be in a position to pursue our daily activities of teaching and writing as fundamentally "open" in their implications. To think through those implications, however, requires that we make a genuine effort at gauging the distance between our

discursive and institutional practices and habits and what those ought to be. It is, I am sure, a conversation worth pursuing.

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### Notes

(1) This essay constitutes a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the 1996 conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism in Boston. A substantially expanded version of this essay is forthcoming in *Lessons of Romanticism* (ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Thomas Pfau) from Duke University Press. For their very enabling and supportive responses to drafts of this paper/essay I thank Sarah Beckwith, Thomas J. Ferraro, Michael Valdez Moses, and Jennifer Thorn. A special thank you goes to Joseph Viscomi for his generous and expert assistance with reproducing the Blake illustrations. [back](#)

(2) Levinson, 1986, 25. Her allusions are to *Paradise Lost* (I, line 63) and to *The Book of Urizen* (Plate 4, line 17). [back](#)

(3) See the work by E. P. Thompson, Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, and David Worrall. [back](#)

(4) For accounts of the centrality and logical convolutions of the Kantian "Schematism" see Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*; Ernst Cassirer, "Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics: Remarks on Martin Heidegger's Interpretation of Kant," in *Kant: Disputed Questions*, ed. Moltke Gram (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967); and Ernst Robert Curtius, "Das Schematismuskapitel in Kant's Kritik der Reinen Vernunft," *Kantstudien* 19 (1914): 338-66. As I have argued elsewhere, the crisis of the subject at the very moment of its logical determination becomes itself the point of origin for an essentially narrative conception of philosophy in the work of F. W. J. Schelling, who paid particularly close attention to the schematism in his early writings. See my *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory*, 8-36. [back](#)

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