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Romanticism and the Spectres of Disinterest

I. The Discourses of Disinterest

The 1790s witnessed a notable transformation in the discourses of disinterest that had developed in Britain since the mid-seventeenth century. To be disinterested was to recognise a public interest beyond private interests and to be able to judge impartially between self-interest and the interests of others. By treating disinterest as a discourse that began in Britain with Hobbes and Locke, rather than with Shaftesbury – as it is more commonly assumed – one can see the discourses of disinterest in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as an early attempt to mediate *between* the public and the private.¹ One could argue that the modern concept of disinterest has tended to be treated *either* as a discourse of the private sphere (in histories of aesthetics) *or* as discourse of the public sphere (in readings inspired by the work of Gramsci, Foucault or Habermas).² These modern theorisations of the autonomy of the private and of the hegemony of the public are perhaps indicative of “the increasing divorce” between “subjectivation” and “rationalization” that Alain Touraine suggests constitutes modernity (4). In his reading of the work of Carl Schmitt, Derrida insists that any discourse reliant on a clear and absolute distinction between the public and the private collapses, falls into ruins (107).³ Arguably, discourses of disinterest are always haunted by the equivocal and uncertain demands of *both* the public and the private. Traditional discourses of

disinterest can be characterised as an attempt to mediate between the different claims of the public and the private spheres and the *ongoing* struggle to find a reasonably stable point of equilibrium between them.

In the aftermath of the regicide of Charles I, Hobbes argued that the problems raised by the private sphere (particularly by the imagination and enthusiasm) and the unstable authority of private judgement could only be resolved by a sovereign public authority underwriting the rule of reason and the laws of nature. For Hobbes, the sovereign is *the "Publique person"*, the only effective common judge and public authority that is above and beyond the different claims, interests and errors of private judgement (Hobbes 285; Tuck 56-63). Hobbes defined disinterest as a discourse of the *public* sphere and the authority of the sovereign. Locke, in contrast, had more confidence in an effective public authority residing in the social roles of the individual and recast disinterest as a discourse of the *limitation* of the private sphere (Tully 32-33). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), he insists that simple ideas, the basic building blocks of the understanding, are a finite stock of ideas that are involuntarily received from "without us", and the subject cannot "*invent or frame one new simple idea*" (564, 120). This foundation of knowledge enables Locke to argue that the imagination can be effectively quarantined from the private and the subject tutored against the errors and delusions of enthusiasm by the checks and balances of reason and experience.

In the eighteenth century, most British moral philosophers would have considered it heresy to associate any aspect of disinterest with Hobbes or Locke. The reaction against these writers focused on their belief in the natural partiality and self-interest of the subject and their view that disinterest required *public structures and institutions* to guarantee the disinterest of the individual. The reaction to Hobbes in particular led to a marked emphasis in the eighteenth century on the *natural* origins of disinterest and intensified the attempts of thinkers such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson to find more reliable grounds for disinterested judgement in the private sphere. Shaftesbury suggested that, within the larger framework of

a rationalist natural order, the rational affections and reflection of the subject could play an *active* and positive role in the formulation of disinterested judgement (Darwall 187).

Hutcheson, on the other hand, turned to Locke's empiricist epistemology for his theory of natural disinterest. He added the ideas of approval and disapproval to the finite stock of simple ideas, arguing that they were the foundation of an involuntary natural moral sense. With the moral sense as a co-ordinating principle, he suggested that the passions could provide relatively stable grounds for disinterest. Still in the shadow of Locke, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson also had to contend with a new emphasis on the influence and power of custom as a source of both regulative standards and the corruption of manners.

Though Hume was more sceptical than his predecessors about the efficacy of natural disinterest, arguing that it must be complemented and reinforced by public and “artificial” structures, he also insisted that in view of the limitations imposed upon the understanding by experience, the imagination plays a crucial role in the constitution of the private sphere. Bringing the *imagination* into heart of ideas of disinterest, Hume concluded that a relation between feeling and imagination, guided by custom, could provide a stable ground for disinterest (Deleuze 24; Eagleton 47). Adam Smith in turn broadly accepted Hume's theory of disinterest and reinforced the authority of the sympathetic imagination in disinterested judgement. However, as a result of his concerns about the corrupting influence of custom and fashion on the moral sentiments, Smith came to lose faith in the ability of the public sphere to provide a *reliable* framework for disinterest. In the final revised edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1790, he suggested that only a private sphere *independent* of the public world could provide a stable point of reference for the general standards of disinterested judgement and conduct in society (Smith 131; Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* 170-71). Smith anticipated a growing sense in the last years of the eighteenth century that the theory of disinterest that had developed since the time of Hobbes was no longer sustainable.

II. Disinterest Under Siege

In the 1790s many writers felt that the threat posed by the public sphere to the disinterested spectator had intensified. As a result, a new urgency attended efforts to find reliable grounds for disinterested judgement in a private sphere independent of the public sphere.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Locke had already expressed concerns about the prejudices, errors and delusions that were the result of certain *external* influences on the subject. After Locke, advocates of natural disinterest such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Smith focused on the power of social customs and conventions to corrupt the moral sentiments of the individual. Shaftesbury notes that a “prevailing custom” can lead the subject to “esteem or admire anything as virtue which is not as such” (*Inquiry* 306). Hutcheson warns that the force of custom often causes the incorrect association of “moral ideas” of “worth, dignity, and merit” with the “finer sort of habitations, dress, equipage, [and] furniture” (*Thoughts on Laughter* 61, 66). Smith similarly observes in the final edition of the *Sentiments* that the corrupting influence of custom and fashion encourages the “disposition to admire, and almost to worship the rich and powerful.” The “great mob of mankind”, he concludes, are deluded by what is publicly praised and “gaudy and glittering in its colourings” (61-62).

Hutcheson and Smith are particularly worried by the influence of wealth, fashion and power on the subject. Their concerns seem to arise not only from the material reality of such things, but from the powerful *images* that attend them: the “finer sort of habitations, dress, equipage, [and], furniture” and all that is “gaudy and glittering in its colourings”, raise strong feelings of *admiration* and a mistaken approval in the subject for the vices of avarice and excessive ambition. These striking images of luxury and status appear to have the power to

alter and pervert the moral sentiments of the individual; they form a *spectacle* capable of dazzling the spectator, leading him/her into false opinions and errors of judgement.

In his *Dictionary* (1755), Johnson defines spectacle as “any thing exhibited to the view as eminently remarkable.” Spectacle includes remarkable images or “shows” that can pervert the moral sentiments and taste of the spectator and generate a corrupt public taste.

Underlying much of the hostility of eighteenth century moralists and critics to spectacle is an anxiety about a public world that appears to be *divorcing* itself from the subject and yet, at the same time, has the power to produce intense *subjective* effects. For many writers spectacle serves as a locus for fears about the artificial dominating the natural, of the power of artifice in society to *refashion* subjective tastes.

The power of spectacle was displayed most unequivocally on exceptional public occasions and in the theatre. Oliver Goldsmith, for example, responded to the plan for a royal procession through the streets of London as part of the coronation of George III in 1761 by deploring the “Taste” for “Shews and Processions.” “Such sights”, he argues, “seldom improve a nation” because “the gay frippery exhibited on such occasions turns the mind of the spectator to false objects of admiration.” Among the “dreaded effects [of such] misplaced admiration”, he warns, is that “the external figure shall dominate the man” (171-72). For Goldsmith, spectacle has the power to corrupt the feelings and judgement of the spectator to such an extent that he/she will come to value show over substance and elaborate artifice over natural sentiment.

In the theatres, the spectacle produced by stage technology was almost universally condemned by critics in the eighteenth century. The effect on the audience of the “scenes and machines” of the theatrical production, the painted and sculpted scenes and mechanical devices used to create extraordinary stage effects and illusions, was characterised by Addison as the mere “Art of imposing upon the Spectators by Appearances: ... *The Knavery or Trickish Part of the Drama.*” These powerful “Artifices” pose a threat to public taste because

they generate strong feelings in the audience “not by proper Sentiments and Expressions, but by the Dresses and Decorations of the Stage” (Addison I: 180, 178, 177; Heller). Spectacle produces anxiety because it suggests both that the public world is disengaging itself from the subject and that this divided public sphere has the power to transform the feelings and tastes of the individual.

While there were concerns about external influences on the subject throughout the eighteenth century, the sense that the power of spectacle posed a problem for discourses of disinterest intensified in the second half of the eighteenth century as more attention was given to the power of sympathy. Hume had argued that sympathy could provide a bridge between the private and the public spheres. “No quality of human Nature”, he observes, “is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (316). The emphasis on the role played by custom and sympathy in the formation of general standards of conduct, manners and taste contributed to the growing perception from the 1760s onwards that the individual was vulnerable to the powerful external influences of society. While the power of sympathy might account for the pre-eminence of the social passions and the disinterest of the subject, it *also* reinforced the impression that the moral sentiments and tastes of the individual could effectively be *refashioned* by an ill informed empathy, a misguided imitation, or common delusion. ³

At the heart of the changing attitudes towards “spectorial sympathy” and sensibility was the belief that morality was dependant on the cultivation of taste (Dwyer, *Enlightened Spectators* 97; Todd). In his revisions of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790, Smith emphasises the dangers of excessive sensibility for the disinterested spectator. Sympathy, he implies, can become a liability when the public at large is deluded and seduced by the artifice and powerful images of society that force themselves “upon the notice of every wandering

eye” (62). Spectacle was thought to be able to distort the disinterested judgements of the individual, to produce inaccurate, partial and false judgements and, consequently, to debase public taste. However, for most of the eighteenth century, spectacle – whether in the theatre or as part of an exceptional public event – was not seen as indicative of a problem with the public sphere as-a-whole, nor did it seriously challenge faith in common sense reality. This was to change in the 1790s.

The French Revolution signified the emergence of a delusion produced *in the public sphere* that was so pervasive it could not be contained properly or grounded in any traditional framework, putting in doubt the underlying confidence in a reliable common sense of reality. In the context of the revolution, the power of spectacle, both in and outside of the theatre, exemplifies a public world that not only seems to be divorced from the subject, but also appears to have cut itself loose from *tradition*. This new kind of spectacle intensified fears of the dangerous effects of sympathy and that external influences would debase subjective tastes.

Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) illustrates the remarkable effect of the French Revolution on the classical discourses of disinterest. According to Burke, “the most horrid, atrocious, and afflicting *spectacle*, that perhaps was ever exhibited to the pity and indignation of mankind” had taken place on 6 October 1789 when the king and queen of France were forced by revolutionary crowds to leave Versailles and return to Paris (*Reflections* 159, my emphasis). This unprecedented and “atrocious spectacle” was iconic of the spectacle of revolution that produced “the most important of all revolutions ... a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” (175). For Burke, the revolution has produced an unprecedented “shock in which manners and opinions perish”, thus weakening “the antient permanent sense of mankind” and “general stock of truth” (172, 275, 258). It is a sign of the extent to which the traditional conceptions of disinterest grounded on a reliable public sphere were seen to be under threat in the 1790s that Burke concludes his analysis of

the effect of the spectacle of 6 October by suggesting that in both France *and* England “the common feelings of man” are in danger of being marginalised. “As things now stand,” he writes, “with every thing respectable destroyed without us, and an attempt to destroy within us every principle of respect, one is almost forced to apologize for harbouring the common feelings of men” (175).

III. The Spectres of Disinterest

In the first of his letters on a *Regicide Peace* (1796), prompted by the “mortifying spectacle” of the “assembled majesty of the crowned heads of Europe waiting as patient suitors [for peace] in the ante-chamber of Regicide”, Burke employs the figure of a “vast, tremendous, unformed spectre” to represent the growth of a public sphere that has cut itself loose from “*all* common maxims and *all* common means” (*Regicide* 206). For the key figures in the traditional discourses of disinterest – Hobbes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith – the *spectre* was emblematic of the problems that arise for disinterest as a result of the delusions of the imagination and the prejudices of custom.⁴ Though a prime example of what Hume calls “the inveterate prejudices of mankind”, the spectre was a delusion that could be managed by the discourses of disinterest (Hume 166). It posed no ultimate threat to the rapprochement between the public and the private promised by disinterest.

In the late 1790s, the association of the spectre with spectacle produced a very different kind of spectre. Spectres had, of course, appeared as part of theatrical spectacles since the re-opening of the theatres at the Restoration. As Fielding remarks in *Tom Jones* (1749), “the whole furniture of the infernal regions hath long been appropriated by the managers of playhouses” (549). However, as Burke's writings on the French Revolution suggest, what distinguishes spectacle in the 1790s is the uneasy perception that it portends the possibility of

a dramatic break with all forms of tradition. In discourses of disinterest, the spectre had been a problematic, but easily identifiable and, one could almost say, *integral* part of the private sphere. As a spectacle, the spectre no longer appears as a product of the imagination: it is an effect of the artifices, the “scenes and machines” of stage technology. This spectre is a delusion produced in the *public* sphere. In light of the traditional associations of the figure of the spectre with the world of subjectivity, instances of the spectre as a spectacle in the 1790s – such as Matthew Lewis's successful play *The Castle Spectre* (1797-98), or the popular show of optical illusions *La Fantasmagorie* – accentuate the fears about an unmanageable public world that has divorced itself from the subject, a public world that has the power not only to refashion individual taste, but to debase and contaminate the private sphere.

The Castle Spectre, which opened in Drury Lane in December 1797, was seen by the critics of the time as “a pantomimical exhibition of the most extravagant nature” and its extraordinary success was taken as an indication of the increasing domination of spectacle over drama in the theatre (*Morning Herald* 2).⁵ It is a testament to the impact of Lewis's play that Carlyle was still singling it out in the late 1820s as the most notorious example of “a radically bad taste” in the British theatre (“The State of German Literature” 37-38; *Life of Friedrich Schiller* 177). *The Castle Spectre* represents the culmination of changes in the role of spectacle in the theatre that took place in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Thanks to the innovations of De Louthembourg in stage scenery and lighting and the enlargement of the theatres, by the late 1790s elaborate and spectacular stage effects had become an indispensable part of any successful theatrical production (Nicoll 137-4; Rosenfeld 80-97).

The *Critical Review* observed that the “popularity” of *The Castle Spectre* was due primarily to “the stage effect” and concluded, “We should disapprove this drama, did we judge of it only in the closet; but its effects in representation is admirable” (476). Anxiety about the effect on the spectator of this exceptional spectacle conditions its hostile critical reception. According to *The Times*, *The Castle Spectre* is “one of the ... most affecting

pantomimes represented on the English Stage”. However, the critic goes on to say, Lewis has “failed” in the “real imitation” of the “feelings of humanity” and “seems perfectly indifferent” to “the varied struggles of contending passions” and the “emotions of the heart” (2). In a letter to Wordsworth, Coleridge is even more emphatic on this point, observing that in Lewis's play there is “no character at all” and “not *one* line that marks even a superficial knowledge of human feelings” (*Collected Letters* I: 379; Hogle). Despite these omissions, the critic for *The Times* notes that the play can still “excite the most sympathetic emotions” in the audience (2). Inflamed by fears about the dangerous effects of sympathy, critics of *The Castle Spectre* complain that it has a powerful effect on the imagination and the passions, without appealing to the judgement of the spectator (*The European Magazine* 42). *The Castle Spectre* is a source of disquiet, therefore, because it raises strong feelings of admiration and approval in the public while appearing to be divorced from the foundations of moral judgement, sentiment and taste (Miles 24).

As James Boaden recalled in 1831, *The Castle Spectre* was received as “a piece really of one scene”: the appearance at the end of Act Four of the ghost of the murdered Lady Evelina to her daughter Lady Angela in a sudden blaze of brilliant light and flourish of solemn music (Boaden 347; Reno 100-2). After the first performance, *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* reported, “We must allow the effect produced by her introduction to be stronger than anything of the sort that has hitherto been attempted” (36). Though the spectre was a great popular success, it was condemned by critics. According to the *Analytical Review*, the great impropriety of the spectre is that it is presented as no more than “an effect produced by the spectacle and music”: an innovative product of the latest stage technology. It is “a spectre that stalks over the stage for no purpose”; it “promotes in no degree the progression of the drama, or the development of its intrigue” (184, 186). This spectre exemplifies the power of spectacle that has *no* relationship to the plot, to the narrative, sentiments and beliefs that represent the world of subjectivity. Lewis's spectre reflects and itself contributes to the sense

in the late 1790s of a public world divorced from the subject, that threatens to pervert, perhaps even invalidate, the subjective world.

The popular Parisian show *La Fantasmagorie* represents another notable instance in the 1790s of the transformation of the spectre into spectacle. The show was apparently first presented in Paris in December 1792, revived in 1798 and imported to London in 1801 (Mannoni 100-4; Robertson; Nicholson). In contrast to the spectre in Lewis's play, which had been played by an actress, the spectres in *La Fantasmagorie* were entirely products of technology. Combining the concentrated projection of light from the Aragand lamp and the painted images on glass slides from the magic lantern, the show added the innovation of motion to create the illusion of “moving”, spectral, projected images (Altick 217-20). While Terry Castle has traced the later “internalization” of the phantasmagoria within a wider “history of imagination”, it is worth emphasizing that the spectres of *La Fantasmagorie* signified a new and disturbing mechanical means of producing *subjective* effects (“Phantasmagoria” 29; *The Female Thermometer*). Divorced from the imagination and all the customary signs of the subjective world, these spectres are iconic of a public sphere that is both detached from the subject and able to debase and in some way *reproduce* subjective effects.

Unlike the spectre in *The Castle Spectre*, the spectres in *La Fantasmagorie* were not merely objects of entertainment that gave rise to feelings of astonishment and admiration; they were also sources of fear and terror (Castle, “Phantasmagoria” 30). As the review of *The Phantasmagoria* show in London remarks, “the magic lanthorn” producing the “terrific figures” was “let down after the disappearance of the light, and consequently unknown to most of the spectators” (Nicholson 148). The source of the fears generated by *La Fantasmagorie* is ultimately the new and “unknown” technology that is capable of creating these unprecedented spectral images. At the heart of the fears about the power of the

machine is a deeper anxiety at the end of the eighteenth century about the increasingly unmanageable relation between the subject and the public world.

By the time Carlyle writes his essay “Sign of the Times” (1829), this anxiety had become widespread. Carlyle suggests that “man’s activity” is determined by a relation between the forces of the dynamical (the inward, the spiritual, and the natural) and the mechanical (the outward, the material, and the artificial). It is “only in the right coordination of the two, and vigorous forwarding of *both*”, that “our true lines of action lie.” However, he argues, the present time has become “the Mechanical Age”, an age in which “there is no end to machinery”, and consequently there can be “no right coordination” of the forces of the dynamical and the mechanical. Worst of all, Carlyle warns, “Not the external and the physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also.” “Men”, he observes, “are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand.” The mechanical has invaded the heart of the dynamical, it “has now struck its roots down into man’s most intimate, primary sources of conviction” (59-63, 73-74). In what is perhaps the most iconic image of the new sense in the 1790s of the dangers posed by the public world to the integrity of the private sphere, a reporter attending *La Fantasmagorie* insists that he has not only seen spectres of the dead that are products of “optical effects”, “I have [also] seen my own image; I have seen myself, going, coming, moving in front of me” (Mannoni 103).

IV. Romanticism and Disinterest

The Romantics are not usually included in histories of disinterest. Nevertheless, their attempts to invert the hierarchies that had constituted the traditional discourses of disinterest can be seen as a culmination of the move of discourses on disinterest in the eighteenth century from a reliance on external guarantees to reason, to sentiment and to the imagination.

While spectacle reflects a growing awareness of the divorce of the public world from the subject at the end of the eighteenth century, the emphasis in the early nineteenth century on a private sphere that is independent of the public world is closely associated with a new confidence in an active and autonomous imagination. A number of the Romantics transformed, and arguably brought to an end the classical discourses of disinterest by attempting to find grounds for disinterest not in a mediated relation *between* the public and the private spheres, but *in the subject*. Smith anticipated this transformation when he suggested that a private sphere *independent* of the public world could provide a reliable framework for *general* standards of disinterested judgement and conduct. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant similarly argued that ostensible “public” judgements of a “*general validity*” are based on a “subjective universality” (54, 51). Like Smith, Kant suggests that the subjective world can legitimate common standards of disinterested judgement.

These Romantic writers attempted to find in the subject grounds for uncorrupted cultural judgements and a point of reference to distinguish between the artificial and the authentic, delusion and reality. Their confidence in the ability of the subject to provide an *anchor* for society was founded primarily on the conception of the active, creative and authoritative power of the imagination. Hazlitt, for example, argues in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) that a compelling framework for disinterest can be found in the subject through the work of the imagination.

In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth provided a canonical articulation of the attempt of Romanticism to “counteract” the “multitude of causes, unknown to former times, [that] are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind” (746-47). For Wordsworth, the lamentable and precarious “present state of the public taste in this country” is reflected in “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation”: spectacle is undermining “the discriminating powers of the mind” (742, 747).

Wordsworth's well-known "endeavour ... to counteract" the threat of the public sphere to "the discriminating powers of the mind" is to advocate a new kind of poetry and a new role for the poet as "the rock of defence for human nature" (753). By counteracting the power of spectacle, he wants to provide a contrary force that promotes the sharpness, discernment and penetration of the subject against those forces that are blunting, dulling, and blurring "the discriminating powers of the mind." Wordsworth's confidence in this contrary force rests on "a deep impression" of some kind of essential *accord* between man and nature. There are, he says, "certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible" (747). It is the privilege of "the Poet" to consider "man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and the most interesting properties of nature" (752). This accord between man and nature provides an implicit resource for the individual to *resist* the pressures of the public world.

The poet's openness to the imagination – "to think and feel without immediate external excitement" – makes him *immune* to the effects of "outrageous stimulation" and a source for the counter attack against the degrading power of spectacle in society (753). The poet's "greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement" enables his/her poetry to provide a ground for a *common* or general standard of discrimination: the poet's "passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men" (753). It is the poet who is best suited to discern and disseminate this accord, and Wordsworth makes it clear that any clear discrimination or possible rapprochement between the public and the private must be grounded *in* the subject.

As I have argued, the spectres seen in popular spectacles of the 1790s were dissociated from their customary origins in the imagination and passions. As such, they are emblematic of the power of the public world to contaminate the world of subjectivity. Partly in response to such spectacles, the figure of the spectre comes to represent for Blake, Coleridge and De

Quincey an *alienated or fragmented* aspect of the subject. The belief that these spectres can be *reintegrated* through the power of the imagination is a sign of confidence in the ability of the subject to resist the pressures of the public sphere and the possibility of bringing the external world into some kind of accord with the internal world.

For Blake, Jesus the Imagination represents a faculty that exceeds the bounds of the finite system or “ratio” of sense-memory-reason that had previously restricted the work of the imagination and the freedom of the subject. However, as Peter Otto points out, “rather than being an end in itself, the freedom of the subject is, for Blake, realised most profoundly in that subject's ability to leave his/her constituted worlds and enter into relation with others” (“A Sublime Allegory” 16).⁶ The Imagination provides a framework in the subject for disinterest, understood now as a reality (Jesus the Imagination), beyond the selfish “interests” of the fallen self (signified by the Spectre), in which we find our authentic, human selves. “He who sees the infinite in all things sees God”, Blake notes, while “He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only” (“There is No Natural Religion” E3).⁷

The figure of the spectre in Blake's *The Four Zoas* (1796-1807) and *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), exemplifies an anxiety about the influence exerted by the public world on the subject (Paley; Otto, *Constructive Vision*). As a reasoning power that is “separated / From Imagination” and entirely confined to “Things of Memory”, the Spectre represents a fragmented and *alienated* aspect of the subject effectively constituted by *past* sense impressions passively received from the external world (“Jerusalem” 74:10-12, E229; Quincey). From the point of view of the Spectre, the human mind is enclosed “in steel”, confined to past impressions, without the active power of the imagination. The Spectre is emblematic of an *internalised form* of the *external world*, an internal representative of orthodox religion and the status quo (Otto, “A Sublime Allegory”). He is, therefore, a figure of suffering, an “Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing.” Alienated from the

Divine Vision, the Spectre sees “from the ou[t]side what he before saw & felt from within” (“Jerusalem” 10: 14-15, E153; 8: 25, E151).

As an internalised form of the external world, the Spectre threatens the freedom of the subject by framing and (as conscience) enforcing obedience to “Laws & Moralities / To destroy Imagination! the Divine Body.” Under the influence of his Spectre, Albion hides Jerusalem from Jesus, separating human inspiration and freedom from divine vision (“Jerusalem” 74: 12-13, E229; 4: 15-16, E146). Despite the threat posed by the Spectre to the subject, Blake argues that he must be *reintegrated*, a task that can be achieved only by the imagination. In *The Four Zoas*, Los embraces the Spectre:

then the Spectre enterd Los's bosom Every sigh & groan
Of Enitharmon bore Urthonas Spectre on its wings
Obdurate Los felt Pity Enitharmon told the tale
Of Urthona. Los embracd the Spectre first as a brother
Than as another Self

(95 [87]: 26-30, E367)

Los's actions represents a turning point (albeit, a somewhat ambiguous turning point in which Los can be said to have been co-opted by the Spectre as much as having overcome his antagonist by embracing him), suggesting that the Spectre can be reintegrated through the work and vision of the imagination. The Spectre now describes himself as a “Spectre of the Living.” He is, in other words, an internal representative of the external world, who recognises that he has a “Counterpart” in Los and the hope of reunification in Urthona (84: 40, E360; 87: 35, E369). In a world where a “pretence of Moral Virtue” has generated oppressive “Laws of sacrifice for Sin” and “Laws of Chastity and Abhorrence”, the free and inspired individual provides an anchor for society (“Jerusalem” 36 [40]: 35, E182; 49: 25-26,

E198). For Blake, individuals can find within themselves the resources to combat – and perhaps overcome – the pressures the restrictions of the public world.

In May 1799 Samuel Taylor Coleridge visited the Hartz Mountains in Northern Germany and climbed the Brocken in search of the Brocken Spectre, an optical phenomenon that had first become widely known in the 1780s in which observers saw a gigantic reflection of their own image in the sky above them (*Notebooks* I: 430). The Brocken Spectre is indicative of Coleridge's anxiety about the influence of the external world on the subject and, at the same time, of his (sometimes wavering) confidence in the subject's ability to overcome such pressures through the imagination. The Brocken Spectre appears at *first* to be part of the objective world, without reference to the subject. This is why the rustic woodsman, described in "Constancy to an Ideal Object" (c. 1817-1828), mistakenly "worships" as a *real* spectre the image that appears before him (*Poetical Works* I: 455-56). As Coleridge notes in his lectures on Shakespeare (1811-1812), when "a man traversing the Brocken in the north of Germany at sunrise ... sees before him a figure of gigantic proportions ... he only knows it to be himself by the similarity of action." The observer initially "sees himself", Coleridge adds, "without knowing that he sees himself" (*Lectures* I: 352; II: 441, 514).

This initial phase of the experience makes the Brocken Spectre a potent symbol for an alienated aspect of the subject. In *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge draws an analogy between an experience of "alienation", "inward complexity and contradiction" and that of an observer who, rather than recognising his shadow "as a projected Form of his own Being ... recoils from it as from a Spectre" (227). The subject draws back in fear when confronted by a *subjective* effect that appears to be part of the external world. For Coleridge, however, the Brocken Spectre is only momentarily a source of fear. The subject soon recognises the "gigantic figure" of the Brocken Spectre as his/her *own* shadow: the Brocken Spectre is an effect produced *by* the subject. As the poet recognises in "Constancy", "he *makes* the shadow" (my emphasis). Coleridge uses the Brocken Spectre to form an "allegory" of the

role played by the imagination in shaping the phenomenal world, and of the alien, threatening world that emerges if this role is forgotten or obscured. As his famous definition of the imagination in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) suggests, in this allegory, the imagination (of God and the observer) becomes a point of reference which allows us to *distinguish* between, on the one hand, the natural and the vital (the products of the primary and secondary imagination) and, on the other hand, the artificial and the inauthentic (the products of fancy) (*Biographia* I 304-5). For Coleridge, the Brocken Spectre is indicative of the often problematic but always necessary affirmation of the existence of a private sphere independent of the public world that opens the *possibility* of creating an external world in accord with the subject (Rajan 96, 204-59).

Nearly twenty years after Coleridge wrote “Constancy to an Ideal Object”, Thomas De Quincey devoted a section of *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), his fragmentary and rhapsodic sequel to *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822), to “The Apparition of the Brocken.” In contrast to Coleridge, De Quincey implies that the Brocken Spectre is emblematic of an alienated portion of the subject which can *never* fully be reintegrated. For De Quincey, when the observer on top of the Brocken makes a gesture, the spectre “*does* repeat it; but the driving showers perplex the images, and *that*, perhaps, it is which gives him the air of one who acts reluctantly or evasively.” In the “driving mists”, the Spectre appears “to dissemble his real origin” (*Suspiria* 155-6). The mist accentuates the subject’s inability to recognise unequivocally the Spectre as “a projected Form of his own Being” and adds an element to the Spectre’s personality *not* reducible to the subject’s imagination (Coleridge, *Aids* 227).

De Quincey’s narrator invites the reader to “ascend” the Brocken and “to test the nature” of the “mysterious” Brocken Spectre. These tests are prompted by a “fear” that the spectre is corrupt and unreliable (153-4). However, rather than dispelling these fears, the “decisive” proof that the Brocken Spectre is a reflex of the subject reintroduces the same doubts. By

“uttering your secret feelings to *him*”, De Quincey notes, “you make this phantom the dark symbolic mirror for reflecting to the daylight what else must be hidden for ever.” For De Quincey, the Brocken Spectre is emblematic of the Dark Interpreter. Like the mists that render the Brocken Spectre an impure and incomplete reflection of the subject, the Dark Interpreter, “originally a mere reflex of my inner nature”, mixes and contaminates the subjective world with “alien natures.” The subject is unable to stop the Dark Interpreter from exerting a force that sends “drifting the anchors of any vessel.” Although “a mere reflex” of the inner world of the subject, De Quincey notes that the Dark Interpreter “will not always be found sitting inside my dreams, but at times outside, and in open daylight” (156-57). He therefore stands as testimony to a *non-recoverable exteriority* within the subject.⁸

In a further fragment of the *Suspiria de Profundis* published in 1854, De Quincey illustrates the origins of the Dark Interpreter by referring to the phantasmagoria. “Perhaps you are aware”, he writes, “of that power in the eye of many children by which in darkness they project a vast theatre of phantasmagorical figures moving forwards or backwards between their bed-curtains and the chamber walls” (“The Dark Interpreter” 7). As Alina Clej remarks, the image of the phantasmagoria, “whether projected by an optical apparatus or constructed in symbolic terms, introduces a distance and uncertainty between subject and object or between the subject and itself” (xxvii). Rather than illustrating the operations of a natural imagination, by the middle of the nineteenth century the “power in the eye” seems closer to the illusions and artifice of *La Fantasmagorie*. For De Quincey there is now no way of closing the gap between the subject and spectre. Instead, and as the Dark Interpreter implies, this gap is likely to widen.

De Quincey’s account of the Brocken Spectre suggests that the subject can no longer hope to bring about a rapprochement between the public and the private through the imagination. The different spectres that inhabit the works of Blake, Coleridge and De Quincey testify to the breakdown of the traditional discourses of disinterest in the first half of the nineteenth

century. The *end* of the traditional discourses of disinterest is marked not by the emergence of a belief in the *autonomy* the private or, alternatively in the *hegemony* of the public, but by the recognition that it is no longer possible to find an effective point of reference in either the public *or* the private spheres or to make a clear and absolute distinction between the subjective and objective worlds. Romanticism can be seen as both the *culmination* and the *collapse* of classical discourses of disinterest.

Notes

1. See, for example, such disparate critics as Stolnitz, “On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury” 98-100; Dickie 12-13; Guyer 48-55; Eagleton 34-36.

2. It is often assumed that the modern concept of disinterest began in Britain with Lord Shaftesbury. Consequently, some influential modern theories of aesthetics have characterised disinterest as an exclusive and autonomous discourse of the *private* sphere. For Stolnitz, drawing on the work on Bullough, “aesthetic disinterestedness” describes both a subjective detachment from all practical and social interests surrounding a beautiful object, and a “stifling” of all the personal interests of the self (Stolnitz, “The Artist and the Aesthetic” 411). This clearing of *all* interests, allows for the subject's disinterested attention or attitude to a beautiful object “for its own sake” (Stolnitz, “On the Significance of Lord Shaftesbury” 99). To justify the “autonomy of the aesthetic”, Stolnitz uses disinterest to separate beauty from questions of morality and to isolate the private sphere from the public (See also “On the origins of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness”). Though they differ from Stonitz on many important points, Dickie and, to a lesser extent, Guyer both treat disinterest primarily as a concept of the private sphere.

In contrast to these traditional definitions of disinterest within aesthetics, critics such as Barrell and Eagleton argue that disinterest is exclusively a product of the *public* world and describes a particular social, economic and political role. This view of disinterest often relies on readings of Foucault and Gramsci (Barrell 32-35, 44). Foucault's influential work has done much to distort our understanding of the spectator in the eighteenth century, in particular the “disinterested spectator” (see Flynn, Gordon and Miles). By aligning disinterest with Foucault's notion of a “disciplinary mechanism” expressed through an “inspecting gaze” which the individual internalises until he “exercises this surveillance over, and against, himself”, disinterest appears to be the result of the

individual's internalisation of dominant public norms and rules (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 197 and “The Eye of Power” 155). Following Gramsci, Eagleton defines the aesthetic as an expression of hegemony, of an “internalised governance” where consent to a dominant ideology is based not on coercion but a “ruling and informing the senses from within while allowing them to thrive in all of their relative autonomy”, to the extent that to transgress the law “would signify a deep self-violation.” Though Eagleton adds an emancipatory aspect to counter this repression within the aesthetic, he nonetheless echoes Foucault in assuming a pervasive internalisation of the dominant ideology of the public sphere (Eagleton 17, 20, 23; see also Gramsci 12, 242, 268).

Habermas similarly defines the private sphere through what he calls “audience oriented subjectivity”, a mode in which subjectivity is “confirmed” by rational communication in the public sphere (49, 54). By defining the subjective world in terms of “audience oriented subjectivity”, Habermas restricts it to a classical model of rhetoric, namely, of ostensibly “private” letters that in fact conform to long-standing “public” rules and conventions of (rational) communication. This, along with the view that the “core” of the private sphere is *not* independent of the public world, leads Habermas to excluded a significant preoccupation of many seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers: the problem of a private sphere that *was* independent of the public world (55). Habermas has no room in his work for the imagination, the passions and enthusiasm, that were seen to be at the heart of the private sphere. Habermas's notion of the 'bourgeois public sphere' undoubtedly accounts for one of the formations or views of the public sphere in the discourses of disinterest, but it cannot account for the attempts of projects of disinterest in this period to mediate *between* the distinct realms of the public and private.

3. I have explored the question of disinterest in Derrida's work in “Derrida and the Ruins of Disinterest”. On another significant revival of disinterest in the twentieth century, see my “Lévinas, Disinterest and Enthusiasm”.

4. On the complex role played by sympathy in this period, see for example: Wasserman; Slzek, 95-10; Marshall; Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, 169, 182; Mullan; and Daffon.
4. See Hobbes 77, 373-74, 441; Locke 396-97; Shaftesbury, *Enthusiasm* 13, 34-7; Hutcheson, *Inquiry* 82-86; Hume 225-26; Smith 71.
5. As Linda Colley has observed, in December 1797 the “external and internal tensions” in Britain seemed to be at their greatest. In the midst of fears of French invasion and the aftermath of the mutiny of the home fleets in June, a royal spectacle was staged to celebrate recent naval victories over the French. Five days after the first performance of *The Castle Spectre*, 200, 000 people watched as the King went through the streets of London. The royal procession broke with tradition by including “250 ordinary sailors and marines” in the spectacle. It is a sign of the anxiety in this period about the *power* of spectacle to corrupt public taste and sentiments that this innovation – introduced by George III himself – was criticised in the press for being a “Frenchified farce” and following too closely the revolutionary spectacles in Paris (Colley 215-16; Ozouf; Russell).
6. I would like to thank Peter Otto. He has been a most rigorous and sympathetic reader and this essay owes a great debt to his inspiring, provoking and generous seminars. I would also like to thank Terry Eagleton for his kind response to an earlier draft of this essay.
7. All references to the page/plate and line number in Blake's works will be followed by the page number in Erdman's edition.
8. For a different reading of the Dark Interpreter see Maniquis.

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