

2010

## " Composing darkness": Romantic Prophecy and the Phenomenology of History

Christopher Michael Bundock

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/digitizedtheses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bundock, Christopher Michael, "" Composing darkness": Romantic Prophecy and the Phenomenology of History" (2010). *Digitized Theses*. 3708.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/digitizedtheses/3708>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Special Collections at Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digitized Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [wlsadmin@uwo.ca](mailto:wlsadmin@uwo.ca).

**"Composing darkness": Romantic Prophecy and the Phenomenology  
of History**

(Spine title: Romantic Prophecy)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Christopher M. Bundock

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

© Christopher M. Bundock 2010

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
**CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION**

Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Tilottama Rajan

Supervisory Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jan Plug

Examiners

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Joel Faflak

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Steven Bruhm

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Antonio Calcagno

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. David Collings

The thesis by  
**Christopher Michael Bundock**  
entitled:  
**“Composing darkness”: Romantic Prophecy and the Phenomenology of  
History**  
is accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

## ABSTRACT

In contrast to the Greek concept of prophecy as a form of prediction, Romantic prophecy rehabilitates a version of Hebrew prophecy that involves a more ambivalent relationship to history and time. That is, while the rise of prophecy in Romanticism might—like the rise of historiography more broadly—seem to organize and contain political and epistemological revolution, closer examination reveals that, in fact, this very attempt at hyper-organization becomes necessary only because of a deep and pervasive sense of historical discontinuity. Hence, while prophecy might aim to ameliorate disorder, in fact it draws attention to and exacerbates this same disorder. This uncertainty stems from a new sense of time as a detotalizing and structurally ironic phenomenon. Hence, chapter one looks at Immanuel Kant's ironic, non-predictive form of prophecy—what he calls the Sign of History—as an example of how prophecy becomes the infinite absolute negativity of history or the counter-science that displaces natural history through a history of nature. Chapter two considers William Wordsworth's claims to special poetic election and his attempt to absorb trauma into historical and subjective *Bildung*. It turns out that while Wordsworth seems to invite what Georges Bataille calls a general economy of expenditure, in fact he restricts this energy in an effort to profit from prophecy. Chapter three looks at Percy Shelley's play, *Hellas*, for how the synthesizing figures of prophecy—metaphor, memory, and history itself—are inverted and displaced by the Wandering Jew. Chapter four, on William Blake's *Milton*, re-conceptualizes the preface as a mode of ambivalent prophecy and reads *Milton*'s ostensibly totalizing form in light of the absolute preface's worklessness. Finally, chapter five uses Ernst Bloch's concept of exodus to organize readings of Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* and Mary Shelley's *Valperga* and *The Last Man* in terms of how female prophecy, specifically, displaces forms of history that remain disabling for marginalized subjects. These works all do this through some version of double negation that inaugurates a negative dialectic, negating the present in an effort to open the future to a new concept of the future.

## KEY WORDS

Prophecy; Romanticism; History; Temporality; Irony; Infinite absolute negativity; Gift; Restricted economy; Dismember; Forgetful memory; Disfiguration; Revolution; Preface; Minute particular; Exodus; Counter-science; Overdetermination; Negative Dialectic; Symptom

Daylight failed  
Insensibly, and round us gently fell  
Composing darkness, with a quiet load  
Of full contentment, in a little shed  
Disturbed, uneasy in itself as seemed,  
And wondering at its new inhabitants.

—William Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began composing this project on prophecy, at least in the idea, upon completion of my Masters thesis, under the supervision of Allan Pero, at the Centre for Theory and Criticism. From that time on, a great number of individuals have in different, often immeasurable, and likely unconscious ways, influenced this study. For, a dissertation is a consuming kind of work. Whatever touches the writer leaves its traces, maybe in obscure but nonetheless in decisive ways, on the final product. Carrie, Makayla, and Annie—I cannot know the future but I will know you for my life.

I owe thanks to many friends inside and outside the academy for salutary diversion: in particular, Matt Austen, Jeff Caughell, Jason Dockstader, Derek Evans, Laura Hansen-Kohls, Jason Kohls, Jared McGeough, Justin Potts, and Morgan Shortt. I have also been fortunate to be surrounded by excellent peers, people who are as intelligent as they are generous and always willing to discuss ideas and share insights. My sincere thanks go to Adina Arvatu, Tom Barnes, Joel Burton, Steve Carter, Michael Choi, David Drysdale, Averil Farrar, Mark Feltham, Phil Glennie, Duru Güngör, David Hickey, Amy Hondonics, Karla Landells, Chris Lockett, Pascale Manning, Maria Mayr, Susan Oliver, Sarah Pesce, and Alexei Procyshyn. I would also like to thank specifically those other Romanticists (or at least Romantiphiles) who participated in and helped to organize the Romantic Reading Group and the annual conferences: Brad Bannon, Shalon Butt, Elizabeth Effinger, Nigel Joseph, Jeff King, Adrian Mioc, and John Vanderheid. Thanks, finally, to Michael Koval and Dave Mimmagh for their work organizing our WOSL soccer club as well as Mark Migueis and Chris Power for running the intramural soccer club.

Naqaa Abbas and Josh Lambier warrant special mention here. Over the past several years Naqaa and Josh have demonstrated, time and again, that rare gift for fostering an intellectual community. I am always impressed by Naqaa's drive to explore new ideas and her talent for languages. Josh and I have worked in tandem, in a sense, since 2003 when we both entered the MA program at the Theory Centre. From this early date, I attempted to emulate his example of intellectual rigorousness and precision. This example remains an idea that I can approach only asymptotically.

I am also happy to be able to thank those professors—Christoph Bode, Jonathan Boulter, Steven Bruhm, Tony Calcagno, David L. Clark, Angela Esterhammer, Chris Keep, Allan Pero, Thomas Pfau, and Matthew Rowlinson—whose questions, criticism, and encouragement have helped me to refine and focus the ideas in this project. Opposition, when framed by genuine collegiality, is indeed true friendship. To Professor Ross Woodman: thank you for your hospitality. For his participation in this project but also for things going far beyond it Joel Faflak needs particular acknowledgement: he is the complete model graceful professionalism and good sense. Jan Plug has read at least two different, complete drafts of this project and offered detailed comments in terms of both the total shape of the work as well as the conceptual details of specific arguments. His patient contemplation and probing, extensive commentary is the best sort of constructive criticism as it engages with and refines rather than simply limits thought. David Collings, whose published work I have drawn on extensively in this project and who was kind enough to act as the external examiner, made wonderful, insightful suggestions about how to translate the project into book form as we wandered, errantly, around campus following the defence.

In *Given Time* Jacques Derrida proposes to begin by way of the impossible: that is, by an analysis of the gift. Here I end with the impossible: that is, thanking Tilottama Rajan for her astonishing generosity. Her generosity is astonishing not only because she manages intimately to inhabit her students' thoughts, to take them up and shape them from the inside but without taking them over; what is remarkable is not, moreover, that she enthusiastically creates conditions for students' academic and professional success; nor is it simply that she works as hard for her students as they are willing to work for themselves. What sets her apart, rather, is how, even in a world that is insatiably rapacious, she continues to give. There is an intensity and a strength in her beyond what I have known in anyone before. This is not strength in the sense of imperviousness. It is, rather, a flexible, Blakean power that is all the more impressive because it is open to what is dangerous, because it is vulnerable to a world full of infernal corrosives. While I cannot reciprocate her generosity, maybe I can just hint at her power by offering what is only possible and too little: thank you.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....	i
Certificate of Examination.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Key Words.....	iv
Epigraph.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi-vii
Table of Contents.....	viii-ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1-14

### CHAPTER ONE

#### *FRÜHEN NEUZEIT: PROPHETIC MEDIATION AND HISTORY'S (DIS)CLOSURE*

I. Time's Revolutions: Beyond the Discipline of History.....	15-43
II. Ironic Historiography and Prophetic History in Kant.....	43-63

### CHAPTER TWO

#### WORDSWORTH'S GIFT OF PROPHECY

I. "As are unheard by all but gifted ear": Wordsworth's Apocalypse.....	64-73
II. "Rare and almost threatening gift": Prophetic Epistemologies.....	73-80
III. Self-Fulfilling Trauma.....	81-95
IV. 'Profit' and Loss: Banking on the Past.....	95-105
V. "the unimaginable touch of Time".....	105-116
IV. "Timely Utterance".....	116-126

### CHAPTER THREE

DISMEMBERING HISTORY IN PERCY SHELLEY'S <i>HELLAS</i> .....	127-160
---	---------

CHAPTER FOUR

“AND HEARD/ THE POET MUTTER HIS PRELUSIVE SONGS”: BLAKE’S BEGINNINGS

I. “labourers divine”: Remembering and Dismembering *Milton*.....161-171  
II. Prelude to the Beginning.....171-185  
III. “Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged”: Schelling’s Past.....185-200  
IV. “the tide of Time”: Time and Eternity in *Milton*.....200-217

CHAPTER FIVE

“THE DARK DESTINY THAT INVOLVES US”: CAROLINE LAMB, MARRY SHELLEY, AND THE SUPPLEMENT OF PROPHECY

I. Prophetic Rebellion as Counterhistory.....218-231  
II. Splitting Heirs in *Glenarvon*.....231-252  
III. “If we can fit but one link to another”: Binding Prophecy in Shelley’s *Valperga*..... 252-266  
IV. “Some vain imagination or deceitful hope”: *The Last Man*’s History of the Future.....266-284  
  
WORKS CITED.....285-295  
  
VITA.....296

## INTRODUCTION

In his short essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” Walter Benjamin credits Andre Breton as “the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’” (*Reflections* 181). In the list of examples of such uncanny objects—“the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them” (181)—one might include Romantic prophecy. For upon the moment of its post-Enlightenment rebirth, prophecy seems already ‘old’ or appears, despite its vogue, as already a discredited form of knowledge. As such, this project is oriented less by an enquiry into the epistemological validity of the occult than by questions about the meaning of this strange form of (re)appearance. If it is increasingly clear that it cannot accurately predict future events, what—one might ask—is the function of prophecy in the Romantic period? That is, what need does the prophetic mode attempt to satisfy? What catalyzes the rise in prophetic writing and posturing in this period? What cultural, philosophical, or political factors make prophecy so attractive to thinkers and the general public in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that James Franks can, in his 1795 *Memoirs of Pretended Prophets, who have Appeared in Different Ages of the World, and Especially in Modern Times*, refer to his historical moment as infected with “prophecy-mania” (iii)?

These questions frame prophecy as a response to something in the political unconscious that is not, itself, immediately apparent but toward which prophecy, symptomatically, gestures. Specifically, what literary and historical analysis suggests is that the elusive and troubling element that catalyses Romantic prophecy consists of a new and particularly disconcerting sense of temporality. As outlined in chapter one, several cultural and political factors coalesce throughout the eighteenth century, crystallizing in the 1790s, to create a newly intensified sense of temporal discontinuity that ends up spurring the reactive emergence new modes of rationalizing historiography by figures such as Montesquieu, Gibbon, Hume, Voltaire, Herder, and William Robertson,<sup>1</sup> amongst

---

<sup>1</sup> Robertson’s description of his methodology in his Preface to *The History of the Reign of Charles V* neatly captures the orientation of universalizing historiography: “While his [i.e., Charles V’s] numerous Biographers describe his personal qualities and actions; while the historians of different countries relate

others. Prophecy is one aspect of this emerging science. That is, broad changes in class-structure, economic and social mobility, psychology, geological science, and—with the French, Irish and Greek Revolutions—political formations and expectations tended to undermine the prevailing, unconscious investment in Natural Law’s timeless truths.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of a sweeping return of the repressed—the return not only of socially marginalized positions but also, epistemologically speaking, of the contingent and irrational elements within thought—across a range of cultural institutions, the Enlightenment’s linear, well-organized shape of consciousness is, at least in part, deranged. Thus it seems that prophecy’s function is to attempt in some way to ameliorate this growing sense of irrational temporality, to import regularity into an increasingly chaotic world.

As noted, prophecy forms one strand within the rise of history as a science, that is, of historiography. Historiography is prophecy’s more credible sibling, one who bears similar traits but aspires to the status of science. Indeed, Karl Popper, in *The Poverty of Historicism* describes historicism as “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history” (3, Popper’s emphasis). Prophecy, in its positive or predictive mode most commonly associated with the term, is made with the same genetic material informing the growth of historical thinking in the eighteenth century and in Romanticism specifically. Yet this would mean understanding history as in some sense, in turn, prophetic—as always already contaminated by prophecy. That is, both discourses would aim to recuperate a sense of rational order, to absorb and perhaps, at their most sophisticated, to sublimate irrationality by translating that negativity into a larger, organic concept of subjective and historical *Bildung*. To put it into Georges Bataille’s terms, discussed in more detail in chapter two, this kind of prophecy and history represents a restricted economy of expenditure, one where negativity or discord is always converted into the work of a larger, rational project. However, if the trickster Jacob is to his traditional brother Esau what prophecy is to historiography, this blood affiliation also

---

occurrences the consequences of which were local or transient, it hath been my purpose to record only those great transactions in his reign, the effects of which were universal, or continue to be permanent” (vi).

<sup>2</sup> See Hans Eichner, cited, below, in chapter one.

complicates such attempts at narrative recuperation—for this affiliation is also a betrayal. That is, Romantic prophecy, perhaps more dramatically and therefore more visibly than historiography, *draws attention to this attempted recuperation*. In contrast to Medieval or Classical forms of prophecy, where prophecy's supplement to temporal determination would in large measure complement the existing world-view—one premised on Divine orders like Providence or the "beautiful order" of the *kosmos*—prophecy's excessive prodigality in the late eighteenth century begins to appear in all its desperateness. Such desperation reveals all the more pointedly the general economy of expenditure—that is, the temporalization of history that would open an unprecedented, unrestricted future—predictive prophecy and historiography as a social science are attempting actively to restrict. For the hyperbolic *assertion* of temporal continuity cannot help but figure—amidst the contrasting social, political, and philosophical turmoil that coloured actual life in the Revolutionary years—as a *wish*. Indeed, this double register is precisely the form of Wordsworth's claims to prophetic inspiration, as discussed in more detail below. Romantic prophecy thus constantly makes a self-conflicting gesture that tends to invert prophecy's expected and conventional relationship to prediction: every affirmative prediction (prophecy) becomes, at the same time, an implicit insinuation of temporal *discontinuity*; the same contingency which prophecy-as-prediction is invoked in order to absorb seems, in other words, to persist and even to intensify through the very act of absorption, staining the cover that would mask the inappropriate, the untimely.

Just as relentlessly reflexive contemplation in Romanticism<sup>3</sup> carries consciousness to the peaks of Absolute Knowledge only to open, at the apex of thought's self-relation, the abyss of the unconscious, so prophecy, deployed through the subtle density of Romantic poetry and prose, reveals its downy underside, its counter-predictive and ironic energy. Prophecy, in other words, takes flight, exposing history's ordering exigency as in part motivated by cultural and political demands to maintain the *status quo*; born out of the furor of the American and French Revolutions and periodically invigorated by rebellions in Ireland and Greece, Romantic prophecy publicizes rational, progressive history's claims to authority as deeply counter-revolutionary—as a discourse that aims to

---

<sup>3</sup> This refers not only to Idealism's attempt to think thought but also to the renewed interest in the self and the genre of autobiography.

drain from the concept of “revolution” the newly acquired sense of “revolt.” Hence, Romantic prophecy follows an ironic logic: its radical ambivalence allows it—especially when deployed in the particular social and political circumstances considered in the following chapters—to repudiate its identification with prediction, to suspend actuality in favour of an immanent if opaque possibility. Romantic prophecy allows history to hover in a kind of negative capability. In fact, prophecy’s impact on historical discourse proves to be significant. For once the irrational is understood as *part of* history rather than a contingent privation of a general orderliness, fundamental narrativity, or metaphysics of presence, it becomes increasingly clear that critical appeals to “get back to history” or to “return to history” become enormously problematic. What, exactly, is being returned to?<sup>4</sup>

Such appeals rely on a particular concept of history’s stability generated through a naïve conflation of history with empirical materiality. Yet, this stability is always already dissolving since narrative conservation acts only *in response to* psychological and cultural disorientation. In fact, to take history as something like the legitimizing and ultimate ground of all hermeneutic and aesthetic analysis relies on de-historicizing history and converting it, ironically, into something transcendent—that is, into precisely the kind of increasingly unconvincing form of order that catalyzed the rise of dialectical, organic forms of history in the first place as more satisfying responses to the realities of contingency, irrationality, and possibility. As the *rise and development* of reflexive forms of history in thinkers like Goethe, Hegel, and Schelling suggests, history is not simply the brute stuff of material existence labelled and displayed in a taxonomic profile but precisely a form of aesthetics and desire; history does not spring fully formed from the head of science but emerges amidst the nebulous forces of a specific social, political, and aesthetic moment. Prophecy helps to reveal this—namely, that history is not a pre-conceptual object that remains at arm’s length from aesthetic productions. History in Romanticism is, rather, nothing other than a name for the various narrative idioms that emerge in an attempt not to repudiate irrationality but to formulate a dynamic, self-reflexive logic of development wherein negativity (to formulate discontinuity in Hegelian, dialectical terms) takes on an active, productive role. Such history is

---

<sup>4</sup> In particular, chapters one, three, and five consider the implications of this problem in relationship to New Historical methodologies.

misrepresented if it is identified with transcendent verities, universal codes, or material substances, not because Romantic history rejects the notion of some kind of order or even totality but because it emerges precisely in the acknowledgement that *a new concept of order* is necessary in order to account for the growing sense of negativity's immanence—the sense of the discontinuous within the continuous, the unconscious within conscious, the temporal within the historical, the Revolution (interruption) within revolution (cyclical return).

Ultimately, prophecy's meta-historical task is to remind Romantic history of its relationship to critical negativity. Such history tends to forget its own originality and to slip back into models of transcendent, static order. In other words, dialectical history in Hegel seems divided against itself in a counter-dialectical way in the attempt, through its perfection of determination in Absolute Knowledge, to eliminate its own discourse by returning history to the atemporal and eternal; for even if Absolute Knowledge does not mean the abrupt end of actual events or lives, Hegel's claim to have established the complete grammar of historical possibility effectively reduces time's discontinuity to an empty, homogenous, and basically spatial field. History becomes eminently reasonable by being the very image of Reason. Hence, Romantic prophecy—adapting the traditional role of the prophet as the social conscience and revising the typical image of the prophet as insane—calls such history back to its immanent discontinuity and madness, resisting the disciplinary and restrictive mastery history, especially in its universalizing mode, attempts to exercise. Prophecy protracts the vital, critical negativity—that is, the possibility opened through time and the unconscious—that Romantic history initially emerged *in response to*, but subsequently aimed to close over once again through its own forms of epistemological management. In other words, prophecy indicates how the history of history itself is not a history of progress *per se*, or that this sort of reflexivity tends toward a kind of perfection that is in fact anathema to temporality. Hence, contrastingly, and ironically, history is most historical—in the sense of temporalized—in its inception, and only fades like Shelley's coal into something resembling Natural Law through subsequent 'refinement.' The chapters that follow attempt, in various ways, to

reveal how Romantic prophecy, the Enlightenment's nagging conscience, brushes historiography against the grain.<sup>5</sup>

While the following pages do attend to specific historical and literary figures that adopt a prophetic mode, the aim is, however, not to offer a taxonomy of prophets, historical or fictional. Furthermore, the following investigations do not offer an exhaustive catalogue of prophetic modes of rhetoric, although this matter does receive treatment, particularly in linking Maurice Blanchot's sense of the radically fragmented nature of the prophetic utterance, discussed in chapter one, to William Wordsworth's call to prophecy, addressed in chapter two. Rhetoric is also important for the analysis of Shelley's tropes in chapter three and Blake's figures in chapter four. Yet, while it is important to treat prophecy as a linguistic phenomenon—as something inseparable from the fiats of announcing, pronouncing, renouncing, *et cetera*—it is essential also to recover something of its ignored phenomenology and temporality. Ian Balfour's seminal study, for instance, will concentrate on the *rhetoric* of Romantic prophecy; and Paul de Man, departing from his earlier phenomenological tendencies, will focus on the *rhetoric* of temporality and of Romanticism more widely. Prophecy, however, has to do with how time and history are formulated as phenomena, as experiences that shape and are in turn shaped by consciousness and affect more broadly. As such, the following chapters also explore prophecy in terms of moods like enthusiasm (chapter one) and anxiety (chapter two). Moreover, prophecy seems to represent a specific form of what Søren Kierkegaard, following Hegel, calls "infinite absolute negativity," a mode of negation that—as discussed in chapter one—links prophecy's suspension of the actual, present, and familiar world to irony, although this is irony understood not merely as a trope but as an existential condition. This existential negativity, then, gestures toward prophecy's important relationship to the literary genre of the preface (analyzed in chapter four)—the infinite, absolute negativity of the literary work. That is, the preface aims to anticipate and organize the work to come, inaugurating the work after the fashion of a prophet. However, just as the Romantic prophet reveals his ambivalent relationship to prediction,

---

<sup>5</sup> "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin *Illuminations* 256-257).



so Blake's prefaces remain suspended between the projected work and a ceaseless act of inauguration. This existential negativity also emerges through the treatment of memory. That is, in its conventional understanding, prophecy is a kind of hyper-memory that attempts to convert the future into something always already 'past.' Yet, a closer look at memory in Wordsworth and Shelley, in particular, reveals that prophetic memory functions, strangely, as the unstable privation of a more fundamental forgetting or unconsciousness (this is discussed further in chapters two and three). It also suggests that history itself as an organizing frame proves much more problematic than initially expected—something evident not only in Kant's discussion in *The Conflict of the Faculties* of the "Sign of History" (in chapter one) but also in Caroline Lamb and Mary Shelley fragmented modes of historical fiction (considered in chapter five).

Chapter one, "*Frühen Neuzeit: Prophetic Mediation and History's (Dis)closure*," begins by analyzing the fate of temporality after the Enlightenment and within in the refinement of dialectical historiography in Romanticism. For in the very claim to overcome static and objective thinking, it seems that the organic coherence sought by thinkers like Herder, Goethe, and Hegel still marginalizes temporality, that this new and dynamic ordering exigency remains at odds with the discontinuity of temporality itself, such that the perfection of history as a social science would, curiously, mean the elimination of time. This occasions a closer look at how a handful of thinkers—Reinhart Koselleck, Jan Patočka, and Martin Heidegger, specifically—attempt to counteract this tendency, to temporalize time and history in order to reformulate the possibilities of the subject's relationship to time, including the possibility that the subject's most fundamental horizon of being *is* temporality. Indeed, Heidegger, as the conceptual spur for Koselleck and Patočka's thought, is important for offering a strong critique of Hegel's basically spatial concept of time. Yet, it becomes impossible to follow Heidegger's thought uncritically to its conclusion in the reformulation of fundamental ontology, since such reformulations aim, ultimately, to recuperate time's negativity, to gather it together or submit its expenditure to the restricted economy of "authenticity." Heidegger's notion of being remains too close to onto-theological notions of transcendent presence to understand adequately the radically detotalizing force of temporality. In an attempt to consider more fully time's strange and disconcerting negativity, the chapter therefore

shifts to a consideration of time's relationship to another kind of negativity, namely, irony.

Focusing on the complex and existential formulation of irony in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* and on the relationship of prophetic speech to presence and absence in Maurice Blanchot's *The Book to Come*, this portion of the chapter suggests that prophecy is a form of irony, one that negates the present, the actual, and Heidegger's concept of the there of being (Da-sein) through its relentless insistence on the discontinuity temporality introduces to any system. Clarifying the relationship between prophetic ambivalence and time requires, thus, attention to the precise formulation of ironic negativity in distinction from negativity in Hegelian dialectics. Once this negativity is better understood, the chapter finally turns to the example of Kant, for whom prophecy—formulated in *The Conflict of the Faculties* as the Sign of History—is deeply ironic. Kant's ambivalence concerning the role of empirical evidence in determining historical development offers a model for the ambivalence encountered in different terms in the subsequent readings of prophecy in various literary works throughout the following chapters.

Chapter two, "Wordsworth's Gift of Prophecy," considers how Wordsworth's poetic claims to prophetic insight cannot be separated from trauma. Especially in the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth tends, in spite of his explicit project, to reverse the futural orientation of prophecy and retreat into elusive psychological depths. This is because Wordsworth cannot quite manage the generosity, the gift of prophecy. If Romantic prophecy's ironic content amounts to the removal of certainty and the present, if it gives purely when it gives no-thing, then the attempt to appropriate this expenditure in the name of subjective elevation proves to be counterproductive. For, ecstatic negativity explodes the subject's coherence: if, as Georges Bataille helps to explain, any subject or selfhood remains beyond the ecstatic moment, this very subjectivity testifies to the translation of the gift into mere property, testifies to the *failure* of pure expenditure. Hence, in attempting to put ecstasy to work in the project of subjective *Bildung*, Wordsworth invites a form of negativity that will always insist and persist throughout the works it generates as a particularly deleterious force. Wordsworth's spots of time illustrate this point, as recollection's recuperation of the past and ostensible stabilization

of the subject cannot help but always also gesture to the traumatic violence that sustains the very possibility of any deep impression. In fact, in a move that anticipates (though implicitly fears) both Shelley and Blake's poetic practices, Wordsworth seems repeatedly and at different levels to invite irrationality, discontinuity, and negativity into his project through the very mechanisms of ostensible development and organization. For instance, beyond the spots of time, the chapter pursues Wordsworth's self-conflicted and re-traumatizing itinerary through an analysis of the rhetorical complexities of his claim to prophetic status and his accidental inversions of temporal predictability, where forward-tending moods like hope become, retroactively, indistinguishable from despair—where the past and the future begin to overlap phenomenologically such that cultural and subjective progression seems to become indistinguishable from regression.

Chapter three, "Dismembering History in Percy Shelley's *Hellas*," looks closely at how Shelley treats prophecy as a figure in several of his works, including *The Wandering Jew*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Triumph of Life*, but particularly in his understudied play, *Hellas*. A closer reading of Shelley's prophets suggests that they are engaged in spectacles of radical dis-figuration and dis-memberment that deconstruct the dialectical work of metaphor, memory, and history aiming ultimately to liberate life from patterns of recurring violence through a new style of writing history. In fact, the recurring figure of the Wandering Jew in Shelley's *oeuvre* functions as an allegory for autobiography's defacement—an allegory in Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man's sense, as a form of expression that is always temporally self-distantiating. For the Wandering Jew is a 'figure' for history and yet he is unable to relate his own history, is unable to write autobiography in terms of a coherent narrative since such writing, if true to his perpetual suffering, must be simultaneously the defacement of any progressive concept of historical development. Hence, the difficulty with which Shelley's prophet reflexively figures himself in several of his texts offers a new and fruitfully problematic basis for analysing de Man's arguments about language and subjectivity. For if the Wandering Jew is the perfect symbol *for* allegory—a figure *of* disfiguration—he also loads with affective and historical freight what for de Man is a basically mechanical, linguistic operation.

Yet, de Man's reading of Shelley is still useful for thinking about how the attempt at self-relation yields to the rhythm of defacement in the detotalization—or, what is the

same, temporalization—of history. In fact, reading between Shelley's *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound* and his historical and literary models, Aeschylus' *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound*, respectively, reveals not a smooth continuity between the Classical and Romantic texts but rather a relation more like Blakean "redemption." For just as Blake's *Milton* rewrites *Paradise Lost* as a psychodrama of redemption as inspiration, where this inspiration is coincident with "Self Annihilation" (43.35) rather than perfect re-collection or recuperation, so Shelley's re-visions of Aeschylus does not aim to absorb the Classical texts into a master narrative. Rather, the tangled lines of influence suggest that *Prometheus Unbound* stands before *Hellas* as a kind of Aeschylean spectre, engaging this group of texts in a confusing play of prefiguration and disfiguration, something that will return in Blake's treatment not only of John Milton but in his (dis)organization of the prefatory relationships within and between texts in his Lambeth period. That is, Shelley's *oeuvre* seems to absorb the rhythms of *The Triumph of Life* such that the Wandering Jew's counterhistory defaces Shelley's corpus as a whole.

Like Mahmud in *Hellas*, Shelley often goes in search of an historical origin only to find the "ever-shifting sand" of time ("Julian and Maddalo" 4). In an effort to clarify that rhythm, chapter four, "'And heard/ The poet mutter his prelusive songs': Blake's Beginnings," looks more closely at the logical and temporal paradoxes of inauguration, the sense that prophecy's claim to narrative coherence and organization relies on a radical anteriority that proves, in fact, to be entirely unstable. As the etymology of the word "inaugurate" ("To make auspicious or of good augury" [OED 3]) suggests, the very concept of the prelude or preface offers another formulation of Romantic prophecy. For, the preface precedes and shapes the book to come. Yet, this claim on the future must contend with the preface's own implicit regressiveness in seeking a place of absolute anteriority. The preface is split between the act of positive inauguration and the impossibility of sufficiently grounding itself—there seems, indeed, always to be the possibility of a preface to the preface—paralleling prophecy's internal contradiction as both a form of continuity (prediction) and an agent of radical and insistent discontinuity (for prediction supplements, and therefore implies, discontinuity). The chapter begins with Blake's *Milton*, which is typically understood as a totalizing vision both conceptually and in terms of Blake's *oeuvre*. A closer look, however, reveals that the

very mechanisms of classifying and dividing that the text employs prove counterproductive. This serves as an introduction to a broader discussion of the paradoxical place of the preface as a prophetic, organizational apparatus in a range of Blake's texts, including *The [First] Book of Urizen*, *America*, *Europe*, and others. It also introduces and complicates time's relationship to organization.

Hence, the later portion of the chapter turns specifically to *Milton's* treatment of the "minute particular" and the renovating "moment" in order to understand better how these orienting or ostensibly synthesizing mechanisms remain fundamentally critical or detotalizing. Through this reading, time in Blake seems to 'expose' history—to set history outside of itself. Like Friedrich Schelling, with whom he is in this chapter compared at some length, Blake displaces traditional metaphysical oppositions such as appearance/essence and reconceives the relationship between time and eternity. That is, Blake does not only reject a conventionally allegorical notion of history as the expression of transcendent causes—something that echoes Percy Shelley's translation of political revolt into literary style in *Hellas* and anticipates both Caroline Lamb and Mary Shelley's treatment of history's relationship to causation in chapter five. Rather, he also understands the eternal in terms of a radical imaginative vitality, as the eternal ability or capacity to 're-state,' in every sense.

Blake's form of prophecy inspires a practice of subjective, political, historical, and literary 're-stating' that stages the reading of three novels in chapter five: Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* and Mary Shelley's *Valperga* and *The Last Man*. "The dark destiny that involves us': Caroline Lamb, Mary Shelley, and the Supplement of Prophecy" opens with a discussion of Ernst Bloch's concept of prophecy's negativity as a catalyst for concrete political action—a form of revolutionary activism latent in the Christian Bible. This indeterminable, mobile, evasive prophetic element—variously described by Bloch as the atheism in Christianity, the not-yet-conscious in history, and the principle of hope—describes in political and historical terms how contingency and irrationality in history, while in some sense unhistoricizable, remains at the heart of the very possibility of history and of the state. In fact, beyond supplying a concept for how prophecy in the novels discussed offers an exodus from a form of history that has reformulated predictive prophecy as disabling inevitability, Bloch also distinguishes between Greek and Hebrew

prophecy. This distinction is important for at least two reasons. First, it offers a way to reframe the two sides of ambivalent, Romantic prophecy—predictive and disruptive—in terms of two different shapes of prophetic consciousness, where the Hebrew mode works corrosively, displacing the disabling Greek mode. Second, Bloch's analysis of Greek prophecy occasions a discussion of Cassandrian prophecy, introducing questions about gender and prophecy. What, for instance, is the relationship between the sexual violence at the heart of this myth and the gender relations in *Glenarvon*, *Valperga*, and *The Last Man*? What, moreover, is the relationship between universal history as the formalization of Cassandrian prophecy and the detotalizing impulse of female prophets in these particular works?

In this context, Lamb's *Glenarvon* writes 'rational,' total history as idolatry, for such history is content to assume the position of a debased or failed image of what is in fact an entirely fictional univocity. Against this ideology, however, Lamb does not pose a compensatory historical iconography; rather, she displaces the very logic of expressive causation, treating history itself as an idol, though no longer in the sense of a misrepresentation but rather as pure simulation. That is, for Lamb history is enormously overdetermined, in Louis Althusser's sense. As such, Lamb's text engages in a complementary overdetermination of its own history. In so doing, *Glenarvon* turns, like the prophetess Elinor St Clare, against historiography's unifying, predictive tendency, offering itself only as a Gothic reliquary of historical fragments. Shelley's *Valperga* likewise seems to turn against its own prophetic tendencies, as illustrated in the brutal treatment of Beatrice, the prophetess of Ferreira. That is, while the text seems intent on disciplining and discrediting prophets—not just Beatrice but also Bindo and Mandragola—the excessive energy with which this is performed suggests a deeper anxiety. Closer analysis reveals that the text is in fact situated at an historical moment when prophecy is born as symptom. The rise of the state on the model of the exceptional subject induces an anxiety within the political order that raises questions about historical progress. As such, the prophet is 'born'—in the sense that "Man," for Foucault, is 'born' within a particular epistemic framework—at the moment he or she becomes a supplement to the political and the historical order. This supplement is dangerous since it exposes the prevailing order's relative weakness, offering a kind of Blochian exodus. As such, the

treatment of prophets in *Valperga* is a desperate attempt to repress the symptom itself, to obscure the supplement through a kind of systemic denegation: that is, a repudiation of the negation that draws attention to this desperation.

Finally, *The Last Man* makes explicit what had remained implicit in *Glenarvon* and *Valperga*: namely, that this symptom is frequently identified as female. Between the treatment of Evadne within the narrative and the evocation of the Sybil of Cumae in the text's fictional frame, Shelley emphasizes how the kind of dialectical, progressive historiography that emerges in the late eighteenth century relies on a foundational repudiation of femininity—a radical sexual violence, in fact. Rather than oppose this system of history with some kind of positively utopian scheme, Shelley, like Bloch, emphasizes rather a certain kind of negativity as the path toward a completely new and therefore necessarily unthought paradigm *for* thought—a shape of consciousness evermore about to be, but not yet available. Thus, Shelley thinks rational history and the 'state of reason'—in every sense—to its apocalyptic end (as apex and conclusion) in an effort not to eliminate possibility but rather to purge history, politics, consciousness, and even desire of what remains a fundamentally disabling paradigm. Thanks to the gap opened up between the narrative and its frame, Shelley is thus able to explode universal history without forcing actual history to be identical to this purgation. For, if the narrative of *The Last Man* seems depressing, the effect of the text changes radically from the perspective of the fictional spelunkers of the Introduction and the actual reader, whether in Shelley's time or our own. That is, the text becomes a possible but not inevitable future, one that, if frightening enough—if strong enough to ward off imagination's attempts at hermeneutic amelioration—might manage to undermine its own threat and negate its own negation.

Taken as a cross-section of a wider phenomenon, these readings of prophecy in Romanticism gesture toward a distinctly Romantic form of history, one that emphasizes the irrational and irruptive forces in the subject such that history gains a rich texture and murky depth. Prophecy, through the corrosive agency of temporality, unsettles predictability through a critical and creative gesture ultimately enabling for marginalized figures and for artistic, political, and utopian thought generally. Far from reaffirming the political *status quo*, losing itself in subjective solipsism, or regressing to illusions of

transcendent verities, Romantic prophecy reflects an active—if anxious—interest in historical participation and affirms the concrete possibility of effective action through its insistence that the prevailing social, political, psychological, and historical conditions cannot eliminate the possibility of critical revision.



## CHAPTER ONE

*Frühen Neuzeit: Prophetic Mediation and History's (Dis)closure*

Organically understood, the universe does not run predictably like a machine but, as with all living things, grows and develops. Growth means irreversible change, and hence history does not unfold in accordance with immutable laws but instead registers contingency. The romantics saw history as susceptible to rupture: a new era might be unlike anything that had come before.

—Jennifer J. Baker, “Natural Science and Romanticisms”

I. Time's Revolutions: Beyond the Discipline of History

In his recent book, *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline, and the Political Uncanny, c. 1780-1848*, David Collings describes a complex relationship between history and determination, suggesting that the various forms of history that arise in late eighteenth-century culture—models that aim to give a rational shape to the past and, implicitly, the future as well—retain a kernel of restless negativity that displaces perfect totalization:

There never has been an irreversible moment, a founding act that institutes civilization or modernity, for any such moment can be inverted on a future occasion. From this perspective we are not the product of an accumulated history, a sequence of events that continuously narrows the opening to the future, but inherit both a hoard of previous figural acts and an as yet untested contrary hoard of figures of negation, repetition, radicalization, or expansion. The past may be determining, but it is also determined, the object of a continuous interpretive activity by which we refigure the meaning of our historical position and the possibilities available to us. If history is a narrative, it is also a counter-narrative of what is as yet unrealized in the countless failed or suppressed projects of the past. (41)

This sense of an immanent counter-narrative—something that echoes Paul de Man's idea that in Wordsworth “the future is present in history only as the remembering of a failed project that has become a menace” (*Reading* 59)—complicates the scene of history's

birth as science. For, as James Chandler notes “Romanticism” marks “the age of the spirit of the age—that is, the period when the normative status of the period becomes a central and self-conscious aspect of historical reflection” (78). Hence, if Romanticism sees the emergence of history’s self-consciousness, it also witnesses—necessarily and simultaneously—the birth of an historical unconscious, something that will perpetually irritate the continuity and coherence of historical narrative. Prophecy is a strand of historiography that exacerbates precisely this kind of irritation even as it seems to promote narrative coherence. Before looking at prophecy, however, it is necessary briefly to trace the shape of historiography across the eighteenth century to understand better how prophecy complicates the scene. Indeed, the concept of history and the science of historiography are particularly mobile in this period because they begin to break from the Classical and Enlightenment sense that history follows a Natural Law where events express unchanging forms or ideas. That is, the emergence of new, dialectical forms of history—the result of a new awareness of history’s immanent counter-narrativity—means that history expresses a *desire* for transcendental order only because confidence in the existence of such order has been shaken. In effect, the idea of history itself descends into change and development<sup>6</sup>; the notion of order itself becomes adaptable and needs to be perpetually (re)organized. At this point, when ideas—including ideas of history—become historical, it is possible, for the first time, to perform not only a history of ideas but also a history of the idea of history.

As Hans Eichner notes, the Romantic formulation of historiography is part of a larger shift in consciousness. This shift catalyses the modern divisions and methodologies of the human and natural sciences. Specifically, Eichner suggests that one “immediate consequence of the concept of an evolving universe was Romantic historicism” (16). For, while “the eighteenth century had by no means lacked interest in history,” the kind of history produced by writers like “Montesquieu, Gibbon, Hume, and Robertson” nevertheless “remained fundamentally ahistorical” (Eichner 16). That is, Enlightenment

---

<sup>6</sup> As Foucault says, “the historians of the nineteenth century were to undertake the creation of a history that could at last be ‘true’—in other words, liberated from Classical rationality, from its ordering and theodicy: a history restored to the irruptive violence of time” (*Order* 132).

history operated under the auspices of Natural Law, treating historical events and persons as punctual manifestations of timeless, transcendent verities.<sup>7</sup> The Romantics, in contrast,

[w]ho had done away with the notion of an unchanging universe, also abandoned the concept of unchanging human nature. As they did so, not only the preoccupation with but also the admiration for the timeless, the universal, and the general made way for a decided preference for the temporal, the local, and the individual; and the most obvious, indeed the only, explanation for the temporal, local, and individual seemed to them history. Here, Friedrich Schlegel was their most eloquent spokesman. "The explanation of an organic product, of an organic being," he declares, "must be historical, not mechanical" (xviii, 21, No. 36). "The world is not a system, but a history" (XII, 418). "The best theory of art is its history" (iv, 230). History is "the only science," and hence "scientific physics . . . must be natural history" (XII, 420). "All science is genetic," and history is therefore "the most universal, the most general, and the highest of all sciences" (xi, xxiv, n. 1). The Romantic fascination with history led to modern, historical philology, which replaced the quest for a universal grammar; to a historical theory of genres, which replaced timeless laws of poetry; and to a biology of evolution, which replaced one preoccupied with classifying supposedly static, unchangeable species. Under its influence, too, the quest for a timeless, universal "natural law" made room for historicism in legal thought and, in the wake of Burke, provided countless arguments against "man-made," "artificial" constitutions such as those of the United States and revolutionary France. (Eichner 16)

---

<sup>7</sup> "The new science that began with Copernicus and Galileo sought to explain the world rationally in terms of the laws of nature, and these laws, like reason itself, were thought to hold uniformly at all times and places. It seemed natural that human beings, the most rational of creatures, should be equally timeless in their essence. Thus even such an excellent historian as Voltaire conceived of morality as being the same at all times and places ('la morale uniforme en tout temps, en tout lieu'), and he speaks of a natural law that must hold equally in Europe and Japan and that inspired Solon and Zoroaster as it inspires us (Lovejoy, p. 290). In fact, change seemed something almost unnatural. Some eighteenth-century philologists found it so unreasonable to suppose that languages change that they denied, in the face of all evidence, that the Romance languages had developed from Latin (Foucault, pp. 89, 121)." (Eichner 16)

If history becomes the discourse of Romanticism, this is thanks to a new experience of discontinuity, irrationality, and individuality. Taken as essential aspects of reality rather than privations or distortions of a fundamental coherence, these new forms of disruption demand a suppler concept of order than that provided by Natural Law. Hence, history begins to resist its characterization as a series of edifying vignettes by calling into question the very validity of the values it ostensibly reinforces. Or, as Friedrich Meinecke notes, the rise of Romantic historical consciousness insists on the “essential difference between the idea of development in the historical sense, and the thought of perfection as embodied in the outlook of the Enlightenment” (22).

In addressing the Enlightenment’s “fundamentally ahistorical” concepts of history, the Romantics in fact critique a certain form of epistemology. For instance, Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—a text that will be important to reconsider in chapter three, alongside Shelley’s *Hellas*—works in the typically Enlightenment mode. Gibbon’s sense of history’s trajectory adopts a basically Aristotelian concept of constitutional revolution. For Aristotle, revolution sees anarchy turn into democracy, which is then replaced—through the “intemperance of demagogues” (1240)—by monarchy, while monarchy is displaced by oligarchy. Oligarchy, however, is not the end of politics, as it remains susceptible to popular revolt: “when great men who are at least of equal merit are dishonored by those in higher office” (Aristotle 1244) the population rises up and reverts to anarchy, beginning the cycle over. Ultimately, then, Aristotle contains revolution in a closed circuit of constitutions: democracy is the initial formulation of the state, reflecting the human drive to state formation for mutual support; yet, increasing social stratification leads to decadence that is, in turn, corrected through an anarchy that re-equalizes the system. In Reinhart Koselleck’s words, “[a]ccording to ancient doctrine, there were only a limited number of constitutional forms, which dissolved and replaced each other but could not naturally coincide. These are the constitutional forms, together with their corruptions, still current today, succeeding each other with a certain inevitability” (45). It seems that Gibbon operates on this model given the markedly neutral, or at least casual, tone of his project. That is, Gibbon can relate what seems to be an enormous catastrophe—the end of Western civilization—with remarkable insouciance because he takes metaphysical comfort in this Classical notion

that history's changes are, at root, contained. Hence, the historian, in this model, is a mere observer of inevitable processes; the historian's ultimate goal is to stand at the centre of history and render everything visible while, like Bentham's guard, remaining invisible.

Gibbon's approach contrasts strikingly with both the creative role accorded to the subject and to the elevated place of feeling in Romantic historiography. For instance, Anthony Ashley Cooper's notion of "enthusiasm" becomes a prerequisite for historical analysis in Romanticism. "Enthusiasm [...] was, Shaftesbury's works taught us, a motive power for the observer, in addition to the aesthetic sense and metaphysical usage. The author wrote in *Moralists* that all genuine love and admiration is enthusiastic, and so are pure scholarship, the travels of explorers, gallantry, war and heroism" (Meinecke 12). Indeed, echoing Foucault's observation, noted above, that Romantic historicism's dialectical approach sought a history that could be *true* rather than merely *accurate*, Friedrich Meinecke remarks that Shaftesbury's "teaching that enthusiasm was the necessary atmosphere for all higher mental and moral life threatened to shake the walls of partition which prevented men from getting a glimpse of spiritual life and history as a whole" (12). So, if Enlightenment history adopts a Classical stoicism, Shaftesbury in contrast insists that the historian enter into the feelings of his subject. In Germany, Johann Winckelmann takes a similar tack, reading the history of art—with its full range of aesthetic effects—as the key to the history of politics: "Winckelmann's new historical sense was already in evidence in his discovery of a succession of styles in art, and the connections between the life of art and the whole life of a nation, particularly with its political destinies" (Meinecke 240). J.G. Herder, too, argues that historical analysis requires a kind of Shelleyan sympathy: "in order to judge a nation, we must live in their time, in their own country, must adopt their modes of thinking and feeling" (27-28).

With these sorts of modifications, history becomes modern because it begins to understand its fundamentally relational, dialogic nature: the historian cannot be a neutral or invisible observer since the concept of "neutral observation" is, especially after Kant, epistemologically oxymoronic. If history insists on trying to be a purely objective chronicle, it will mislead itself since its object is organized, and in that sense created, by the historian to a greater degree than in other sciences. Hence, Romantic historicism

embraces the problem of 'subjectivity,' in every sense. Resultantly, the concept of historical order gains a mobility analogous to, because woven into, the mobility of the subject. Indeed the subject, following Fichte, Hegel and other speculative thinkers, must be understood as a demand or desire for identity—a kind of drive—rather than an unchanging substance. Given its fundamental integration with subjectivity, historical knowledge, then, becomes much denser than the Enlightenment could allow. To be an historian is, in Romanticism, to be a philosopher and a psychoanalyst as well.

It is this difference that underlies Paul Veyne's assertion that the Enlightenment mode of history—something still popular in the social-scientific institutionalization of history—"has made no progress since Herodotus or Thucydides, however surprising that affirmation may seem" (106). History of this sort is what Foucault calls "natural history." This kind of knowledge treats the past as an archive of imitable examples. These episodes, however, are able to retain explanatory or ethical power relevant to the present and future of human experience only because the human is considered an unchanging essence. As Peter Gay argues, the Enlightenment perpetuated the

idea of the historian as censor or builder of morale[, an idea that] was a heritage from Classical antiquity; history had always been an adjunct to ethics or politics, it had always been called upon to point a moral, enlist loyalties, improve its readers. In the time of Voltaire and Gibbon this notion was still very much alive. In 1763, James Boswell noted in his journal, "I employed the day reading Hume's *History*, which enlarged my views, filled me with great ideas, and rendered me happy. It is surprising how I have formerly neglected the study of history, which of all studies is surely the most amusing and the most instructive." This was the philosophes' view as well; as classicists, as radicals, and as men of their time, they sought to amuse and instruct, like everyone else. (383)

Again, this 'instruction' is very problematic because it valorizes a particular kind of subject—the subject of this education—as universal and timeless. It is additionally problematic from a theoretical perspective: typically, history is less an accumulation of *exemplary* events (i.e., the most banal habits of the everyday and therefore the most representative of a particular moment) than a narrative tying together *exceptional* events.

Indeed, this paradox emerges especially in dialectical and reflexive forms of Romantic historiography where subjectivity's central place tends to make history a fundamentally exceptional kind of discourse. As Giorgio Agamben points out, the concept of the "example" is problematically situated between the exemplary and the exceptional, in that the moment something becomes an example it is singled out and, therefore, exceptional: "The example [as representative of a set] is thus excluded from the normal case [within the set] not because it does not belong but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it. The example is truly a *paradigm* in the etymological sense: it is what is 'shown beside,' [from the Greek, *para-deigma*] and a class can contain everything except its own paradigm" (22).

Hence, Romantic history, as much as earlier forms of history, seems to conflate the distinction between an *event* as *exception* and the retroactively generated *narrative* of *examples*, essentially confusing what might be consistent enough for general pedagogical use (example) with what is in fact too complex and nebulous to serve as some kind of universally communicable *factum* (exception). In *Writing History*, Veyne makes this point quite forcefully, if in different terms. That is, if particular exceptional events in history have a complex set of causes, this complexity ought not to be confused for some kind of intelligence—even a self-modifying and responsive intelligence—behind or below these events, rendering the events and their temporal succession the expression of a universal mind or spirit. For to do this is to invent a replacement for Natural Law:

Since "superficial cause" does not mean a cause less effective than another, it is not possible to discover main lines of evolution [in history], any more than they could be found in a game of poker lasting for a thousand years. [...]. When speaking of historical chance or any of its synonyms [...], we must carefully distinguish a single event from history taken as a whole. It is very true that certain events—the Revolution of 1789 and that of 1917—have deep-rooted causes; it is not true that history, in the last resort, is exclusively guided by deep-rooted causes rising from the middle class or the historic mission of the proletariat [as an Hegelian Marxist might argue]—it would be too easy. Thus, understanding history does not consist in being able to discern great underwater currents below

the surface agitation; history has no depths. It is well known that its reality is not rational, but it must be known that it is no longer reasonable; there are no issues that are normal, giving history, at least from time to time, the reassuring look of a well tied-up plot in which what ought to happen does happen. (104)

Louis Althusser, in *Reading Capital*, anticipates this criticism. For Althusser, what Veyne describes as the confusion between event and narrative in the self-mystified concept of history can be formulated more specifically as a confusion of method for theory:

To put it crudely, history lives in the illusion that it can do without *theory* in the strong sense, without a theory of its object and therefore without a definition of its theoretical object. What acts as its theory is its *methodology*, i.e., the rules that govern its effective practices, practices centred around the scrutiny of documents and the establishment of facts. What it sees as taking the place of its theoretical object is its 'concrete' object. History therefore takes its methodology for the theory it lacks, and takes the 'concrete' of the concrete obviousness of ideological time for its theoretical object. (109)

So, when Chandler, Foucault, and others refer to the birth of history in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this refers to a moment when history, attempting to ameliorate this theoretical deficit, begins to look at itself as a science, or tries to conceive of itself as a rational totality defined less by particular objects or instances than by a coherent though dynamic *process* intimately connected to subjective consciousness. The idea is that that process can be taken as rational and understandable, therein rendering history Absolute (in the Hegelian sense) and therefore effectively finished since the 'grammar' of history is completed.<sup>8</sup> So, ultimately, while this certainly marks an improvement over Classical and Enlightenment histories predicated on Natural Law, Romanticism's dialectical totalization of history seems to diminish the complexity of subjective temporality. Hence, prophecy emerges at this point as a symptom of Romantic historiography's failure perfectly to repress time.

---

<sup>8</sup> Later, in chapter five, I will look more closely at Althusser's critique of mechanical and expressive modes of historical causality in what amounts to a displacement of the metaphysical logic of grammar/instantiation or language/speech in historical terms



Romantic prophecy exposes the negativity introduced—if also partly disavowed—by the new, complex place of the subject in dialectical historiography. In Romanticism, the un-thought moves from a place on the periphery of thought's expanding empire in the Enlightenment into the very interstices of cognition: negativity 're-collects' in the shape of an unconscious that is immanent and radically resistant to thought rather than outside thought and imminently known. This casts a shadow over the so-called birth of history. If knowledge is revolutionized through the birth of "Man," a "strange empirico-transcendental doublet" that emerges when the conditions of possible knowledge enable a form of self-reflection that discloses "in him [...] what renders all knowledge possible" (*Order* 318), this reflexivity does not lead to total clarity but rather opens an abyss within knowledge as such. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault illustrates how several areas of the human sciences undergo fundamental epistemological reorganization, resulting in a kind of metamorphosis of the limits of possible knowledge. For instance, philology transforms into linguistics and physiology becomes biology; a basically taxonomic form of ordering through comparison shifts to an ordering where negativity works dialectically through a process of formation capable even of self-modification. Order becomes a principle, an exigency, following the 'model' of the Romantic notion of the system as the *demand for* systematicity rather than something objectively and actually totalized. Yet, perhaps because history, as Althusser argues, has no theory to begin with, the epistemic shift that results in history's 'birth'—the very idea, for instance, that history *has* a 'grammar' that organizes its field—does not mean that eighteenth-century history is really able to undergo the same kind of overhaul witnessed in other sciences. For while it is true that history in Herder and Hegel, for instance, becomes more self-reflexive—that it raises the question of history as an immanent idea (Herder) or dialectical science (Hegel)—it nevertheless shrinks from the workless, undialectical negativity of contingency and temporality, the symptomatic discontinuity of the *exceptions* that form its very content.

William Godwin's short essay "Of History and Romance" helps to illustrate this tension where Romantic history becomes more self-aware and yet also conscious of its methodological limitations—where it distances itself from the timeless truths promulgated in Aristotelian Natural Law and the mere chronology of prehistorical

thought even as it attempts to discipline irrationality in new, more complex ways. That is, for Godwin, history retains something of its Classical moralizing and pedagogical function but only insofar as it abdicates universality, in terms both of its object of investigation and the applicability of its lessons. Godwin's history continues to function similarly to Enlightenment histories but only when it embraces its relationship with fiction or romance. Godwin begins by dividing history "into two principle branches; the study of mankind in a mass, of the progress, the fluctuations, the interests and the vices of society; and the study of the individual" (453). Against the "dull repetition" of the first branch, Godwin advocates inquiry into exceptional individuals, "illustrious men, such as we find scattered through the long succession of ages" (456). For Godwin, in a rather Shaftesburian way, only intimacy with "the development of great genius, or the exhibition of bold and masculine virtues" can foster "an exchange of real sentiments" and spur moral "improvement" (458). Indeed, since Godwin's guiding questions for historical analysis have less to do with factual accuracy and more to do with edification—he asks first of historical narrative, "Can I derive instruction from it? Is it a genuine praxis upon the nature of man? Is it pregnant with the most generous motives and fascinating examples?" (461)—he will suggest that it is perfectly reasonable to supplement history with fiction. In fact, he goes so far to suggest that history is a mode of fiction, namely "fable" (461): a sentiment echoed by Veyne who asserts that "history has some likeness to the novel (or lying history)" (55). However, if Veyne's comments suggest that fiction is deceptive while history is not, Godwin will actually invert this relationship. That is, not only can romance furnish intimacy with edifying examples as well as (if not better than) history proper but it also has the virtue of rejecting history's illegitimate self-aggrandizement, its "graver name" (463). History, if done well, is romance.

Godwin, as if straddling the Enlightenment-Romantic divide, makes two important gestures in his argument. First, he preserves the Classical and Enlightenment sense of history as a pedagogical apparatus that operates in both moral and intellectual spheres. But for Godwin, this edification is tied to a kind of micro-history of the exceptional subject, one "not contented to observe such a man upon the public stage" but keen rather to "follow him into his closet" (458). Second, Godwin argues that this kind of edification can be accomplished fictionally and that, in fact, romance has the advantage

of *displaying* the fictional quality that is, equally, active although repudiated in so-called proper history. And yet, Godwin's text seems suddenly to turn against itself. "True history," he writes, "consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines" (466). Just as this passage itself seems naturally to 'decline'—to begin with a sense of universal human nature but end in decay and rupture—so it remains unclear if the personal history Godwin privileges as the most edifying form of history is even *possible*. For in the final paragraphs of his essay, Godwin asserts that while "the conjectures of the historian must be built upon a knowledge of the character and his personages" it is, paradoxically, also true that "we never know any man's character": "My most intimate and sagacious friend continually misapprehends my motives" (466), Godwin laments, as if echoing his own fictional character, St Leon, whose motives and historical adventures are, from the time he acquires the Philosopher's Stone, completely opaque to all but him alone. In a strange reversal, the analysis of particularity—of exceptional, individual historical agents—that was supposed to offer the deepest moral and therefore historical insight, turns out to be, at the same time, radically resistant to enquiry. The same individuality that makes the valorized historical figure *exemplary* turns out to bar the intellect's access precisely because that exemplarity is coincident with *exceptionality*.

In this Godwin sounds, perhaps unexpectedly, rather like Friedrich Schelling. For in *Ages of the World* [3]—discussed at greater length in chapter four—Schelling comments, "certainly one who could write completely the history of their [*sic*] own life would also have, in a small epitome, concurrently grasped the history of the cosmos" (3). Yet, as Tilottama Rajan points out respecting this passage, this "is not to say that one *can* write one's history, which is itself enveloped in a prehistory that exceeds it, the prehistory of life, of being" ("Psychoanalysis" §2). That is, if Schelling, like Godwin and other Romantics, sees the individual as the key location for undertaking some kind of history, he recognizes a similar paradox in that this same subject is always partly beyond the province of the understanding. For Schelling this is because the emergence of the subject in idealism as self-conscious, as a being that thinks its own capacity for thought, is

possible only through a complex action of repudiation or abjection: consciousness only becomes self-consciousness in the modern sense against the backdrop of an unconscious understood not as the privation of thought but rather something constitutively and absolutely outside comprehension. Foucault, in fact, will describe this epistemological conundrum as the very essence of modern 'Man' as "constituted at the beginning of the nineteenth century" (330). That is, if Godwin would follow the subject into his closet, Foucault and Schelling suggest that he might, like Caleb Williams, discover only a deeper mystery. Indeed, "man appears," Foucault writes, "in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator, he appears in the place belonging to the king, which was assigned to him in advance by *Las Meninas*, but from which his real presence has for so long been excluded" (312). Hence, any theory that aims to transcend a taxonomy of examples through an analysis of history via an analysis of the subject will encounter not so much history's original essence as the very retreat *of* the origin—the origin as nothing other than the rhythm of its retreat and return, as the radical self-displacement or exceptionalism of the very subject who, as sovereign, is able to decide on the state *of* exception.

Hence, if thinkers like Schelling and Foucault practice a mode of historiography, the emphasis in each case remains on immanent systemic catastrophe—the notion in Schelling of possible regression or de-evolution and in Foucault of non-dialectical epistemic breaks. The effect of this emphasis is to turn history into a *critical* system, a form of order aware of its finitude as well as its limited epistemological and pedagogical import. This brings us back to the place of prophecy. For, on the surface prophecy attempts, like Classical and Enlightenment history, perfectly to organize and eliminate contingency by implying a transcendent realm according to which history is always already determined. At the same time, however, prophecy represents a "counter-science" (*Order* 379) within Romantic historiography. Foucault uses this term to describe positions in knowledge—knowledge as organized in the human sciences—that express "a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established" (*Order* 373). Rather than definitively establishing facts through inquiry, a counter-science reveals the irreducibly opaque conditions of the development of knowledge *as* a positivity. Hence

counter-sciences are not “less ‘rational’ or ‘objective’” than positive sciences but rather “flow in the opposite direction,” they “lead them back to their epistemological basis, and [...] they ceaselessly ‘unmake’ that very man who is creating and re-creating his positivity in the human sciences” (*Order* 379). Foucault’s treatment of the history of nature (i.e., the notion that nature *has* a history) as a counter-science to natural history thus gestures toward the deeply ambivalent attitude prophecy adopts toward historical and subjective *Bildung*.<sup>9</sup> For even if universal history marks an advance over the Enlightenment concept of historiography—a kind of archive management or cultural stewardship—there remains a totalizing exigency that tends to suppress temporality and the new future time opens. It is, in fact, precisely this universal history that Heidegger objects to in what he calls, as discussed below, historiography: a history that detemporalizes and flattens out the historicity of human existence. By stressing the finitude of being, Heidegger reminds historiography of the disruptive temporality of human life, thus opening the discourse of history to a reading of prophecy as natural history’s counter-science.

\* \* \*

Romantic historical thought seems to surface as a rupture of Enlightenment history. The Romantic shape of historical consciousness marks a “break in the Western tradition of an incremental path to knowledge” (Tribe xiv), disclosing human existence as resolutely historical while covering over, at the same instant, the epistemological claims

---

<sup>9</sup>By “natural history” here I mean the conception of history *in general* as something non-constructed or simply given to the understanding. The term, however, inevitably overlaps with a *particular kind* of history, namely, one that focuses on tracing natural phenomena over time as, for instance, in evolutionary biology or geology. While it is impossible to go into detail here, there is a parallel between how the term “natural history” shifts from designating the general form of history to naming a specific type of history and the way—discussed below—that “revolution” in the Aristotelian sense is contaminated and displaced by the sense of revolution as revolt or interruption. That is, when the division of knowledge in the Enlightenment and its reorganization in Romanticism re-phrases “natural history” as a particular way to study the natural world, the term is re-situated between its older application, as a concept of history in general, and a new discourse, the history of nature. In its ambivalent overdetermination, “natural history” seems divided not simply between two historical moments but between two concepts *of* history. Like a cross-section of sedimented earth, the concept of “natural history” bears witness to an epistemic break between its semantic layers.

traditionally made in history's name. Hence, history, as a narrative exigency or even perhaps as a sense of determinations compacted over time, is predicated or founded on a kind of 'historical' *discontinuity*, a break that cannot be narrated because it is what makes the particular form of narration or hermeneutic phrasing possible in the first place. In terms that will become important below, there is here a kind of historical parabasis, an interruption *in* narrative (and historiography *as* narrative) that is, more precisely, the interruption *of* narrative and of history. When Chandler, then, seeks "to historicize the question of historicism" (33) in the Romantic period, this must be understood as an invitation to articulate a new concept of history, of time, and of the historical subject. Indeed, Jan Patočka, in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, remarks that "history is nothing other than the shaken certitude of pre-given meaning" (118). In other words, history, as a mode of self-understanding, emerges when society's sense of itself becomes explicitly problematic: "thus in the historical epoch humankind does not avoid what is problematic but," in an almost masochistic turn, "actually invokes it, promising itself from this an access to a more profound meaning than that which was proper to prehistorical humanity" (Patočka 63). From this perspective, the accumulation of historical facts is not, in itself, historical; rather, only when that data is narratively schematized through attempts to explain cause and effect does it acquire properly historical meaning. Again, the somewhat ironic condition for the emergence of history, understood as investigating causes, is the *loss* of history as something self-evident, commonsensical, or hermeneutically neutral. In fact, the rupture of prehistory by history 'proper' corresponds to the existential condition of a "life unsheltered, a life of outreach and initiative," a way of being that "*is* differently, since it itself opens up the possibility for which it reaches" (Patočka 39).

Patočka's thinking about history rephrases Heidegger's arguments concerning both the origin of historicity in the structure of human existence and the strange way that history discloses itself phenomenologically in what would seem to be the interruption *of* history. Toward the end of *Being and Time*, Heidegger challenges the claim of science—specifically, the science of history, or historiography—to explain or ground itself adequately. The inauthentic or vulgar thinking of history, a merely statistical-anecdotal mode of recording events, tends to understand human existence as *in* time, thus posing

for itself the problem of life's continuity. From this everyday perspective, "Da-sein traverses the time-span allotted to it between the two boundaries [i.e., birth and death] in such a way that it is 'real' only in the now and hops, so to speak, through the succession of nows of its 'time'" (Heidegger 342). Such thinking implies that Dasein is "something objectively present 'in time'" (Heidegger 343). For Heidegger, however, such a perspective not only fails to ask how it is possible for Dasein to be an object of history in the first place, but it also mistakenly reduces human existence to the horizon of objective presence. Heidegger suggests, rather, that humans are not so much *in* time as fundamentally structured *as* temporal—that Dasein can become historical only because it is already so, in its ontological structure. Hence, "Da-Sein does not first fill up an objectively present path or stretch 'of life' through the phases of its momentary realities, but stretches *itself* along in such a way that its own being is constituted beforehand as this stretching along. The 'between' of birth and death already lies *in the being* of Da-sein" (Heidegger 343). It is, then, only on the basis of Dasein's fundamental constitution that anything like a science of history can be grounded. Ultimately, ontic historiography cannot account for "the basic phenomenon of history, which is prior to the possibility of making something thematic by historiography" (Heidegger 344).

Dasein and the useful things that make up its world can *be* objects of historiography only on the basis of the "temporalizing of temporality" (Heidegger 349) or fundamental historicity of Dasein, a condition that historiography as a science of objectively present things cannot help to clarify, since Dasein and its world are never completely available to objectification.<sup>10</sup> This is because sciences, as sciences, have a

---

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger's importance at this stage of the project centers on his critique of the Hegelian concept of time as a mere variation of space. To follow Heidegger's exposition, "Hegel's concept of time presents the most radical way in which the vulgar understanding of time has been given form conceptually" (392). This is to place Hegel in Aristotle's company, since time, for both, is something objectively present. For Aristotle time *is* what is counted or measured "in" time. And precisely *what* is counted are the "nows." The nows, in other words, are like objects within the very present that they, at the same time, constitute. Hence, the nows "are 'seen' ontologically in the horizon of the idea of objective presence" (Heidegger 387). This means that time is understood as an infinite series of punctual nows, or as now-times, essentially confirming Plato's quip that time is the image of eternity; "the now is now in *every* now, thus constantly the *same*, even if in every now another may be disappearing as it arrives. Yet it does show at the same time the constant presence of itself as *this* changing thing" (Heidegger 387-388). This suspension of the arrival and disappearing of the now in a present informs Hegel's most concise definition of time in the *Logic*: "as the negative unity of being-outside-itself, time is similarly something absolutely abstract and ideal. It is the being that, in being, is not, and, in not being, is: it is intuited becoming. This means that the absolutely momentary distinctions that directly supersede themselves are determined as external, but external to

methodological limit, namely, thematization: science places objects on the horizon of objective presence such that they are measurable, quantifiable data. This procedure does not permit science to enquire into the very process whereby things become *available to* thematization, that is, the process of being's (dis)closure through particular, finite beings. In contrast, phenomenology contends with this issue, as the process itself—appearance as such—cannot be understood clearly in terms of merely manipulating or measuring existent material. Heidegger phrases the paradox thus: “the idea of historiography as a science implies that it has grasped the *disclosure* of historical beings as its own task. Every science [however] is primarily constituted by thematization” (359). In a sense, then, Hegelian or other dialectical forms of historiography—despite their admirable reflexivity—cannot trace their own history, that is, the basis of their possibility as sciences, since such reflexivity imposes a barrier to, even as it promises, greater self-understanding. This is because the unity of ecstatic temporality in Dasein takes shape as a process of understanding one's existential structures rather than ontic states: Dasein's being-toward-its-death is what throws Dasein back onto itself, revealing its “*factual thrownness*” which, consequently, “gives to the *having-been* its unique priority in what is historical” (Heidegger 353). Indeed, the manner in which Dasein comes back to and understands itself more clearly in its authentically historical being seems to run counter to the everyday sense of history as ‘coming from the past,’ for it is Dasein's futural orientation that initiates the process: “*authentic being-toward-death, that is, the finitude of temporality, is the concealed ground of the historicity of Da-sein*” (Heidegger 353).

Put differently, if history is to emerge as something more than what Nietzsche would call “a disguised theology,” a self-interested and ultimately cynical attachment to “all the scraps that fall from the bibliographical table,” it must appear, from the perspective of this sickly “antiquarian,” as a rupture, disruption, even a destruction of history (20, 49)—hence the valorization of what Nietzsche will call the “unhistorical” power, or “forgetting,” as an antidote to “historical fever” (69, 4).<sup>11</sup> That is, in a tricky

---

themselves” (§ 258). Hegel's dialectical concept of time thus sounds like the most refined version of Ecclesiastes' assertion that “there is no new thing under the sun” (1:9). In his critique of this sort of a-temporality, Heidegger thus gestures in the direction of the kind of prophetic temporality that will displace fatality—even if it seems, at first, that prophecy is a synonym for inevitability.

<sup>11</sup> “By the word ‘unhistorical’ I mean the power, the art, of *forgetting* and drawing a limited horizon round oneself. I call the power ‘super-historical’ which turns the eyes from the process of becoming to that which



phenomenological gesture, authentic history—what is, for Heidegger, Dasein's self-understanding as thrown-projection toward its own-most possibility—can only appear, can only disclose itself, 'historically' in terms of what seems to be unhistorical, or as Nietzsche again says, "untimely," since the being of Dasein can never be made objectively present without conflating the ontological difference between beings and being as such. Therefore, in Heidegger's words, "lost in the making present of the today, it [i.e., inauthentic historiography] understands the 'past' in terms of the 'present.' In contrast, the temporality of authentic historicity, as the Moment that anticipates and retrieves, *undoes* the making present of the today and the habituation to the conventionalities of the they" (357-358, Heidegger's emphasis). What this means, then, is that any organized attempt to represent this rupture in fact only represses the emergence of authentic historicity or restricts the general economy of temporal expenditure. Somewhat ironically, vulgar historiography is, then, a symptom of the attempt to *cover over* Dasein's radical historicity.

Yet, such a gesture—in spite of itself—cannot help but call attention to precisely what it seeks to repress. In a strangely protracted manner, ontic historiography *does* aid historicity's appearance, but only indirectly and against its own apparent efforts. That is, the era of the rise of historicism is really the era of a crisis of historicity, the era where historicity threatens to disclose itself and is, therefore, repressed all the more violently through the very proliferation of historiographies. For, to make a Foucaultian point, better than merely hiding something is pretending not to hide it: better than merely repressing something is putting it to work. To put Heidegger's discussion in more psychological and social terms, society embraces historiography in order to sublimate the anxiety of history's temporalization and the sense of isolation and alienation modern time produces by distancing subjects from comforting absolutes like "Human Nature," "Progress," or even perhaps "God." In a more Heideggerian idiom one could say that historicity is covered over in its ostensible disclosure through historiography. Indeed, as Heidegger

---

gives existence an eternal and stable character—to art and religion. Science—for it is science that makes us speak of 'poisons'—sees in these powers contrary powers; for it considers only that view of things to be true and right, and therefore scientific, which regards something as finished and historical, not as continuing and eternal. Thus it lives in a deep antagonism toward the powers that make for eternity—art and religion—for it hates the forgetfulness that is the death of knowledge, and tries to remove all limitation of horizon and cast men into an infinite, boundless sea whose waves are bright with the clear knowledge of—becoming!" (Nietzsche 69-70)

notes, “ultimately, the rise of the problem of ‘historicism’ is the clearest indication that historiography strives to alienate Da-sein from its authentic historicity” (361). The situation is, then, doubly ironic: if historiography is, unexpectedly, the covering over of historicity, historicity nevertheless manages to ‘appear’ *as* this very covering over. Thus, if historiography ultimately helps historicity to appear in its ontological structure, it does so only symptomatically or according to a counterintuitive index that anticipates the discussion, below, of Kant’s Sign of History.

Heidegger and Patočka’s idea that the ontological rootedness of history might be disclosed through a rupture in the surface of history can, in one sense, be historicized. In fact, this rupturing is the characteristic action of specifically *Romantic* prophecy. As Koselleck suggests, a particularly acute awareness of, and ambivalence concerning, history emerges alongside an understanding of historical time characteristic of the late eighteenth century: “the decade from 1789 to 1799 was experienced by the participants as the start of a future that had never yet existed” (56). For Koselleck, the French Revolution introduces a change to the concept of revolution itself—marks a kind of revolution of revolution. As noted above, the pre-Romantic sense of the term connotes an Aristotelian “revolution of constitutions,” or a certain predictable pattern of historical change that is, in essence, circular, working on the analogy of celestial revolution as a rotation and a return (Koselleck 41).<sup>12</sup> For, if Plato’s state was, in Aristotle’s view, utopian for failing to acknowledge that states—like the human subjects on which, in Plato, they are modeled—perish, Aristotle’s response nevertheless suspends *Bildung* through a repetition that is essentially circular. As Alexander Kojève notes, Aristotle would assert that “there is no absolute political Knowledge relating to *one* of the possible forms of State. But, happily, there is a closed cycle in the transformation of States, which is *eternally* repeated. Therefore this cycle can be understood *conceptually*; and by speaking of it, one can grasp the different States and Man himself through concepts” (115-116). Yet, if this concept of “[h]istory has nothing to do with what is called ‘History’ today” (Kojève 116), it is because modern history is a response to the

---

<sup>12</sup> The *De casibus* tradition of Medieval historiography, based on Boccaccio’s series of biographical sketches, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, is a specific example of history’s reduction to a kind of taxonomy of repeatable forms. As Larry Scanlon notes, readers often “see in its continual insistence on the instability of Fortune, and the nearly invariable downward trajectory of each narrative it presents, nothing more than Medieval didacticism of the most static variety” (121).

possibility of a development in the concept of change itself. With the French Revolution, for instance, violent upheaval and civil war—traditionally conceived as either outside of historical regularity (therefore insignificant contingencies) or completely absorbed by predetermined narratives—seem to contaminate history, to gain traction as historically significant events by appropriating and transforming the content of the Classical concept of revolution.<sup>13</sup> As Koselleck suggests, “revolution, initially a transhistorical expression bound to natural factors, was consciously employed as a metaphor for long-term or especially sudden political events, to ‘upheavals.’ To this extent it could contain elements of civil war” (44). The contamination of the naturalistic basis of the word “revolution”—something happening also in geology thanks to Georges Cuvier’s catastrophist theories of global evolution—means also a breach in the limits of historical representation: that which would either not have figured or would have threatened to disfigure historical regularity itself is, in this reconfigured conceptual idiom, able to leave its mark on history or to gain a certain historical legitimacy. History’s meta-psychology, as it were, takes on Freudian dimensions: irrational and regressive events, rather than being understood as exceptions to history and easily dismissed as chance errors, become ‘properly’ historical, become part of the tissue of history, forcing the very concept of history and historical change to reformulate itself. Thus, as Nikolas Kompridis suggests, “to say that an openness to the novelty of the future, an openness to disruption, discontinuity, and unforeseeable change, is what makes modernity historically distinctive as an epoch and as a form of life is not to say quite enough” (40): the modern, Romantic subject is not merely oriented toward the future but toward an altogether new concept *of* the future.

---

<sup>13</sup> The shift from an Aristotelian concept of revolution to the notion of revolution as the violent disruption of cyclical economy can be phrased, in Collings’ terms, as a shift from parodic, carnivalesque forms of symbolic inversion characteristic of early modern culture to the formulation of such difference as the inhuman, threatening Other of culture. So, for instance, “by choosing to read the Revolution *as* disaster, Burke *constructs* an instance of the traumatic Real” (*Monstrous* 73). That is, as Collings argues, Rabelaisian inversion mocks the system of symbolic exchange but does so in an effort only to reorient the relationships within that field. That is, it does not aim to eliminate symbolic exchange itself. In contrast, disaster rewrites inversion as a kind of total violence, one that displaces displacement just as romantic revolution (rebellion) displaces revolution (repetition). That is, while symbolic exchange defers violence precisely through exchange, disaster—like the gift—suspends that economy in the name of a kind of *jouissance* or in the refusal to sublimate desire. “The shift from inversion to disaster is crucial in this regard; by rewriting inversion, which mocks the entire field of signification, as disaster, which destructively disfigures that field, Burke creates a counter-poetics of what Lacan would later call the Real” (Collings *Monstrous* 73).

In a parallel context, Gerald M. MacLean, in *Time's Witness: Historical Representation in English Poetry, 1603-1660*, describes more precisely how the revolution in the concept of revolution in historiographical consciousness must be linked to the historical conditions of actual political revolution. From an implicitly Marxian perspective, MacLean argues that history in seventeenth-century England involved “a theory of representation based on metaphors of space and sight” (4) as a result of the prevailing political model—namely, monarchy. Historiography adopts a view of the past akin to the position—timeless, transcendent, ‘objective’—accorded to the sovereign, effecting a “reduction of time to space” indicative of “the limits of the possible historical consciousness of the time” (MacLean 5, 20). Social consciousness and aesthetic productions are dialectically invested in the politics that shape daily life; cultural works and forms of consciousness are not merely the effects of politics but also shape the politics that will, reflexively, shape them. Therefore, radical changes in politics have complex though corresponding effects on the organization of knowledge. In other words, since the English and French revolutions both involved what Franco Moretti calls “the deconsecration of sovereignty” (42), displacing monarchy through some form of popular governance, historiography is altered in kind as the notion of a transcendent, totalized vision of the past becomes fractured through this political upheaval into a more nebulous field of perspectives—a perspectivism that Caroline Lamb, as discussed in chapter five, takes full advantage of in an effort to displace prevailing forms of historical narrative. Hence, where “the revolution in historiography of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries established history as a self-regulating discipline of knowledge whose terms were increasingly subject to debate” (MacLean 17), this transition, it seems, echoes the democratization that establishes *government* as a self-regulating discipline similarly subject to debate. In other words, the revolution of the concept of revolution, the radical revision of the sense of history that shifts emphasis from mere repetition to discontinuity, is dialectically related to actual, political revolution.

For Koselleck, the revolution of revolution coincides with the “temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history,”<sup>14</sup> or interrupts the iterative and therefore comparably spatialized sense of time based on naturalistic revolution—what Mikhail Bakhtin calls

---

<sup>14</sup> The phrase quite clearly echoes Heidegger’s “temporalizing of temporality” (349) discussed above.

“Folkloric time.”<sup>15</sup> Such temporalization is the ultimate consequence of “the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity,” converting past futures—futures that were in a basic sense predictable for being essentially continuous with their present—into the opacity of modern futures, into the “*frühen Neuzeit*” of modernity (Koselleck 5). That is, if Romanticism witnesses the rise of modern historiography—of different, relatively self-conscious ways of conceptualizing historical order in the wake of Natural Law’s delegitimation—this historiography is itself produced as a reaction to time’s loss of internal continuity, when past, present, and future no longer form a predictable itinerary, therein soliciting compensatory organization. This discontinuity marks—briefly, in a sudden flash that dies almost instantly—a certain openness to a future that is literally unprecedented and, as such, completely new rather than recycled. As Kompridis suggests, temporalization means that “our old way of thinking and acting could not have prepared us in advance for the difference the new introduces. There are no empirical or inferential relations that allow us to move from the old to the new without expanding our empirical or logical space: the new introduces empirical and inferential relations that were not already there” (33-34). That is, rather than simply paralysing the subject, Romantic, temporalized historical existence introduces “the time of the new, the time of new beginnings,” or an orientation “that is expectantly open to the novelty of the future” even if this means that Romanticism cannot “bring its idea of itself to

---

<sup>15</sup> In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin names the cyclical form of time in preindustrial culture—a “*profoundly spatial and concrete*” (208, Bakhtin’s emphasis) time based on naturalistic repetition—“folkloric time.” In this chronotope,

human life and nature are perceived in the same categories. The seasons of the year, ages, nights and days (and their subcategories), copulation (marriage), pregnancy, ripening, old age and death: all these categorical images serve equally well to plot the course of individual life and the life of nature (in its agricultural aspect). All these images are profoundly chronotopic. Time here is sunk deeply in the earth, implanted in it and ripening in it. Time in its course binds together the earth and the labouring hand of man; man creates this course, perceives it, smells it (the changing odors of growth and ripening), sees it. Such time is fleshed-out, irreversible (within the limits of the cyclical), realistic. (208)

Like other commentators discussed here, Bakhtin notices that this conception of time undergoes a fundamental reorganization in the eighteenth century: “[w]hen the immanent unity of time disintegrated, when individual life-sequences were separated out, lives in which the gross realities of communal life had become merely petty private matters; when collective labour and the struggle with nature had ceased to be the only arena for man’s encounter with nature and the world—then nature itself ceased to be a living participant in the events of life” (217).

completion” or that “it cannot ‘ground’ itself in its claims to autonomy so long as it is open to the new, to unforeseeable new beginnings” (Kompridis 37).<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the concept of history in Romanticism begins to look prophetic in precisely the terms of Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blanchot. For, as Koselleck remarks, the revolution in the concept of revolution and the *frühen Neuzeit* of modernity apparently “unchain a yearned-for future while the nature of this future robs the present of materiality and actuality” (18). Likewise, Kierkegaard suggests that “the prophetic individual does not possess the future—he has only a presentiment of it. He cannot claim it, but he is also lost to the actuality to which he belongs” (*Irony* 260). The Romantic prophet represents precisely this modern, temporalized, historical subject. Paradoxically,

---

<sup>16</sup> While the revolution of revolution—the temporalization of history—suspends the appeal to historical precedence, this suspension is not itself, in a strange way, unprecedented. As MacLean’s study of historiography during the English civil war suggests, the seventeenth century offers a political precedent for the *suspension of precedent*. The notion that historical sensibilities might become increasingly dissatisfied with the logic of appealing to precedent as authority and its mystical structure dictating that “the older the claim, the stronger the argument” (MacLean 18-19) is not, then, unique to Romanticism. And yet, it seems odd to say that the suspension of precedent as a meaningful way of understanding one’s historical moment is itself a precedent to which Romanticism might refer. For the *form* of such a relation is precisely what the *content* of the revolutionary historical moments reveal to be impossible. This meta-historical ambivalence toward precedents for the unprecedented is something several Romantic texts—discussed at greater length in the chapters that follow—like Percy Shelley’s *Hellas*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and Blake’s minor Prophecies, seem especially sensitive to given their complex investment in scenes from the past even as that past proves, hermeneutically, unstable or revisable. Indeed, the impossibility of absolutely severing ties with some mode of continuity—for a *history of the suspension of precedence* constitutes the re-containment of time by space—seems to be the problem Romantic utopianism explicitly labours under. In fact, Romanticism seems to act in response to its own ‘precedent’ in a way that would both build on and yet, in doing so, deviate from Cromwell’s fate.

MacLean argues, for instance, that a deficit of imagination was partly responsible for the success of the English monarchy’s restoration: “if opposition poets [i.e., anti-royalist poets] had done a better job of imagining unprecedented futures that did *not* require monarchy, then there would have been less need for the Restoration” (9). While MacLean immediately backs away from this point—“yet to do so would surely be to misconstrue the tasks and responsibilities of the poets however directly engaged they might be in changing the world” (9)—it seems, in fact, to find echoes in Romanticism, specifically in works like Percy Shelley’s *Defence*. In other words, earlier instances of time’s liberation from space—of history’s temporalization—suggest that a major difficulty for revolutions in or of consciousness is the public’s reluctance or inability to transcend the comfort afforded by some version of precedent, a comfort that tends to re-discipline temporality. For instance, in the case of the English civil war, argues MacLean, “the new age, however unprecedented it might have been, remained inescapably bound to traditional artistic habits of thought and representation, and to a past form of government, one headed by a single, heroic leader” even if that meant poets of the Commonwealth would often “prefer republican Rome to monarchist England” (233, 224). To avoid a similar fate, revolutionary Romantic poetry would thus have quite radically to revise concepts like allusion—something Blake’s *Milton*, in its re-visioning exigency, illustrates. In an effort to register temporal discontinuity and the kind of future it opens, history in Romanticism would have to remain suspicious even of its comparison to other instances of revolution, as such instances would tend to replace imaginative production with a practice of memorialization that would, again, diminish the future’s prodigal opacity.

history as a discipline—and as a form of disciplining time—appears, symptomatically, when everyday, comfortable regularity fails to account for either world-historical events or subjects' subsequent existential distress. History seeks, artificially and quite ironically, to preserve or to return to the continuity of *prehistorical* life, following a nostalgic itinerary in seeking, in effect, to complete history in history's complete annihilation, its re-absorption into futures past.<sup>17</sup> History—even in its partial liberation of individuality from Platonic and Aristotelian schemes and from the Natural Law tradition—would ultimately counteract the frightening, abyssal freedom of time itself, a freedom similar to the purely negative (in the sense of workless) freedom of irony. And yet, what would it mean to face this freedom? What would it mean to face history understood as the defacement of social, political, cognitive, and sensible regularity, or as the removal of certainty by pure possibility? As hinted above, such an historian might be thought of as ironic in Kierkegaard's sense. In fact, the Romantic prophet is indistinguishable from the ironic figure of the historian—who is himself nothing other than the historical subject of Romanticism. As an ironic historian—an historian who suspends or revokes historical content in order to prepare for the new, unprecedented future—the Romantic prophet figures, like Kierkegaard's Socrates, as the midwife to history or as the preface to historical actuality, a position that in itself, contrary to Hegel's attempt "to reclaim a positive content" (*Irony* 269) for Socrates, is only the condition of possibility for positivity and as such, if thought in a rigorously dialectical manner, absolutely negative and unactual.<sup>18</sup>

Prophecy in the Romantic period cannot simply be identified with concepts like anticipation or prediction, since these concepts aim in fact to discipline the much more ambiguous and potentially disruptive effect of prophecy. If history emerges, as a reaction to temporality, in and as a kind of hiatus in actuality, it is also trapped in this hiatus such that it cannot impose its narrative with total success. For prophecy discloses, in spite of its synthesizing and unifying vision of time, a perpetual preface in history that resists instantiation and regularization, just as freedom in Kant would resist direct legislation.

<sup>17</sup> That is, a return to a concept of the future as something continuous with the past and present, a concept of the future characteristic of Bakhtin's folkloric time.

<sup>18</sup> "Kierkegaard is, ironically, much more dialectical than Hegel on this point. For Kierkegaard, Socrates was essentially ironic, essentially negative, and yet his standpoint of negative freedom cleared the way for positive freedom, and in this respect deserves a positive evaluation" (Hall 328).

This is not to say—at the other extreme—that prophecy is always non-predictive: rather, its relation to prediction is essentially ambivalent. Hence, prophecy’s effects, as a specific kind of performance, cannot be reduced to its predictive efficacy. Indeed, like the concept of revolution, prophecy in Romanticism is infected with its complete Other. “Claus Westerman,” for instance, “has shown how the lament, the prayer, and the threat are as characteristic of prophetic discourse as are the prediction and the oracle” (Balfour 5). As Ian Balfour’s study illustrates, as far back as Herder and Eichhorn in Germany and Robert Lowth and Alexander Geddes in Britain, prophecy is recognized as a complex form of linguistic performance, one that, specifically, complicates the notion of the promise. In fact, the concept of prophecy is almost schizophrenic: just as historiography tries to repress the same historicity and temporality it reveals, prophecy attempts to repress—through its synonymization with prediction—the radically unprecedented future time opens up. Prophecy, reduced to prediction, could be seen as a defensive attempt to transform the most dangerously unpredictable element into a figure of prediction as such; in fact, precisely this operation is discussed at greater length, and in the specific terms of “denegation,” in chapter five in connection to Mary Shelley’s *Valperga*. Maurice Blanchot, developing the insights of Andre Neher’s seminal *L’essence du prophetisme*, goes further along these lines, emphasizing the negativity of prophetic speech, how as a linguistic performance prophecy remains intensely ambiguous: “to foresee and announce some future event does not amount to much, if this future takes place in the ordinary course of events and finds its expression in the regularity of language. But prophetic speech announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence” (*Book 79*).<sup>19</sup> Rather than providing

---

<sup>19</sup> To look forward to chapter three, this helps to clarify why, in the case of Percy Shelley’s play *Hellas*, Ahasuerus the prophet diminishes the significance of future knowledge, for it seems that there is nothing interesting or unusual about simple prediction if what one predicts is that the repetition of the same will repeat again, or if prophecy does not claim to change the very nature of the relationship to the future:

Would’st thou behold the future?—ask and have!

Knock and it shall be opened—look and, lo!

The coming age is shadowed on the past

As on a glass. (803-806)

As Mark Kipperman notes, “‘The coming age is shadowed on the past’ not because all time is the same illusory moment but because the cycle of revenge and retribution has produced a history empty of progress, a history about to end in 1821, a moment suddenly pivotal, not insignificant” (163).



foreknowledge, Blanchot argues that “when speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence” (*Book 79*).

In his short essay, “On Prophetic Speech,” Blanchot hollows out the concept of prophecy, placing emphasis on prophecy’s typically ignored or repressed disruptiveness. For Blanchot prophecy is not a full speech, is not the mystical merger of signifier and signified in a divine *Logos*. This is because, in the first instance, prophetic language

only repeats the speech confided to it, [and is] an affirmation in which by a beginning word something that has actually already been said is expressed. That is its originality. It [i.e., prophetic speech] is first, and yet there is always before it already a speech to which it answers by repeating it. As if all speech that begins began by answering, an answer in which is heard, in order to be lead back to silence, the speech of the Outside that does not cease: “my incessant Word,” says God. (*Book 82-83*)

The prophet’s ‘original’ utterance is always already displaced by the implicit interval or difference occasioned by repetition. Hence, the prophetic utterance is hardly univocal but rather aims to generate the impression of univocity in order to obscure or manage the discord that solicited the prophet’s supplementation in the first place. “Prophetic speech is originally dialogue” (*Book 82*), even if that dialogue amounts to a mere echo, given the fundamental difference implicit in any mediation of the immediate. In fact, in a move that recalls Kierkegaard’s tendency to treat rhetorical or grammatical phenomena in terms of existential positions—for example, Socrates not only speaks ironically but *is* irony—Blanchot describes the prophet himself as a kind of split-personality, as a subject who has lost possession of himself in becoming possessed by the God:

Suddenly a man becomes other. Jeremiah, gentle and sensitive, must become a pillar of fire, a rampart of bronze, for he will have to condemn and destroy all that he loves. Isaiah, decent and respectable, must strip off his clothes: for three years, he walks naked. Ezekiel, scrupulous priest who was never lacking in purity, feeds himself on food cooked in excrement and soils his body. To Hosea, the Eternal says, “Marry a woman of

whoredom; let her give you a prostitute's children, for the country is prostituting itself," and this is not an image. (*Book* 81-81)

Blanchot links this sense of psychological displacement—a kind of insanity or subjective 'seizure' in every sense of the word—back to the literally unsettled condition of the Israelite's priest class, as described in the Old Testament. That is, if "prophetic speech is a wandering speech that returns to the original demand of movement by opposing all stillness, all settling, any taking root that would be rest" (Blanchot 79), this means that the language itself reflects the geographical condition of the Levites—the one tribe denied a specific plot in the promised land: "but to the tribe of Levi he gave no possession: because the Lord the God of Israel himself is their possession" (Joshua 13:33).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, if Shelley's Wandering Jew, discussed in chapter three, emerges from a Medieval folkloric tradition, he also gestures toward this older record of an essentially Hebraic placelessness.

For Blanchot, this description of the prophet serves, ultimately, as a description of the poet's essence as the ultimate mediator between the divine and the human, between being and beings. In "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin," the poet is described as prophetic not because his or her speech is absolute but, on the contrary, because the poet negotiates the relationship between existence and existents—a relationship that cannot be actualized and therefore hovers in a strange, ontological anticipation that Blanchot will call the "Sacred." The Sacred, says Blanchot, following Heidegger, "is the immediate [...], the immediate that is never communicated but is the principle of all possibility of communicating" ("Sacred" 120) and thus must stand outside of and logically anterior to mediation, or any play between phenomenal revelation and concealment. Hence, the poet is mediation as such, is the navel or gathering point of the universe that assembles the "All": "essentially, poetry relates to existence in its totality" such that "what poetry has connection with, what, undoubtedly, allows it to be connection itself, is not nature (as plant, people, or sky, or nature as ensemble of real things) but what Empedocles calls *boundless totality*" ("Sacred" 115). The poet-prophet thus stands in a place prior to the mediation he or she makes possible and is something like the immediacy of mediation. Hence, when it comes to establishing continuity, the prophet is, existentially, as

---

<sup>20</sup> The Bible offers an alternate reason for this exception in Genesis 49:5-7.

ambivalent as he or she is rhetorically. The Sacred poet marshals the “shining power whose outpouring is the law, principle of appearance of what appears, origin of all ability to communicate” (“Sacred” 122). Or put differently, the prophet creates a radical opening in the universe that allows phenomena to appear at all, making all subsequent oppositions between discovering and covering-over—the whole play of cognitive and phenomenal light and dark—possible: “the Sacred is the day: [but] not the day as it contrasts with the night [...]. It is the day, but anterior to the day, and always anterior to itself; it is a before-day, a clarity before clarity” (“Sacred” 121).<sup>21</sup>

If the Sacred is the immediate that enables mediation, it is difficult to describe its structure as anything but a kind of radical self-displacement—as a Derridian trace or a Schellingian “intermediate concept,” something that “neither has being nor does not have being” (*Ages [3]* 64, 39). Indeed, Blanchot adopts the rhetoric of prophecy to describe this structure precisely because, for him, prophecy refers to the essential displacement or evacuation of the mediator—that is, the displacement or evacuation of essence. Blanchot articulates the problem of the immediate’s mediation through the delicate phenomenology of temporality, where the poet can be thought of as existing in anticipation of his or her own being. Hence, the poet, “existing as a ‘not yet,’ [...] has grasped, foreseen the arrival of the Sacred, which is the principle of this very arrival anterior to any ‘something is coming’ and by which ‘all’ comes, the All comes” (“Sacred” 122). That is, the poet must “exist as a presentiment of himself, as the future of his existence” just as the poem’s ‘presence’ is nothing but the anticipation—the ‘pre-sense’—of presence: “a poem is not without a date, but despite its date it is always yet to come, it speaks in a ‘now’ that does not answer to historical indicators. It is presentiment, and designates itself as that which does not yet exist, demanding the same presentiment from the reader to make an existence for it, one that has not yet come into being”

---

<sup>21</sup> Blanchot does not mean to suggest that without poets there would be no universe. Rather, the poet represents something like a logical necessity for explaining how it is that the infinite and the finite have come into contact. Hence, “the poem must exist” not because its absence would turn being into nothingness but “because without it the day would be there but it would not light up; without it everything would communicate, but this communication would also be at every moment the destruction of everything, lost into an always open infinity” (“Sacred” 125). Put differently, it is only through their relation that the infinite and the finite gain contours: just as beings do not properly exist without being, it is also the case that “the Immortals need mortals, need finiteness,” for “their light, too close to original unfurling, needs to become thicker to light them up truly, to become clarity upon them” (“Sacred” 124).

(“Sacred” 117, 112). As a figure standing at the threshold of the world’s constitution, the prophet is existentially ambivalent. That is, the prophet is located between mediation and immediacy in an opposition that can coalesce into a dialectical drive but only by abandoning its intermediate position and, with it, the prophet’s very Sacredness.

That is—as Kierkegaard would say of Socrates’ irony—the sacred (immediately mediating) prophet *never can* come into being or actuality without abdicating his or her place as the immediacy of mediation. And yet, it is the very insistence on expressing this inexpressibility—through the silence of that impossible speech—that draws attention to this impossibility. For, as Blanchot asks, in language that recalls William Blake’s *[First] Book of Urizen*, “how can the Sacred, which is ‘unexpressed,’ ‘unknown,’ which is what opens provided only that it is not discovered, which reveals because unrevealed—how can it fall into speech, let itself be alienated into becoming, itself pure interiority, the exteriority of song? In truth, that cannot really be, that is the impossible” (“Sacred” 126). However, as Blanchot’s fascination with Orpheus might suggest, the impossibility of possessing the Sacred or rendering the Sacred objectively present—the impossibility of reconciling the Sacred (immediacy) with speech (mediation and productive negation)—does *not* mean that the poet abandons such a project: not only did the poet “never shy away from this freedom of poetic existence that condemns him at once to the distress of an existence purely to come and to the terrible trial of being the place of extreme opposition, but he embodied it as no other did” (“Sacred” 130)—even if this meant suffering certain disembodiment or literal dismemberment.<sup>22</sup> That is, figuration’s disfiguration, like the interruption on the surface of history that (dis)closes historicity, is the operation through which the Sacred manages to be ‘expressed.’

After all, in another echo of Orpheus—but also, perhaps, recalling the tortured Hebrew prophets or the suffering of Blake’s “Eternal Prophet” (*Urizen* 10:17), Los—“whoever wants to be a mediator must first be torn apart. Whoever wants to take on the ability to communicate must lose himself in what he transmits, yet feel himself incommunicable” (“Sacred” 130). That is, the very impossibility of Sacred speech (hence

---

<sup>22</sup> Blanchot is engaged in the same kind of problem that I will discuss in connection with Paul de Man, in chapter three. De Man, however, will reduce the issue to a merely rhetorical play between trope and performance—linguistic meaning and linguistic being—that casts language into an abyss of perpetual (dis)organization and (de)totalization.

Blanchot's scare quotes around the word in his essay's title) is what leads the finite back to the infinite—as if the prophet's word manifests itself only in silence, for “silence is the only real communication, it is the authentic language” (“Sacred” 126). If time and historicity both announce themselves in the interruption or persistent irritation of the same history they make possible, then charting this irritation will consist of an analysis of the silences—or in the phenomenological stuttering—that afflict Romanticism when literature confronts the revolutionary concept of the future. Hence, chapter two considers the impalpable condition of impression disclosed in Wordsworth's gibbet-mast episode from *The Prelude*. Similarly, Ahasuerus' narrative deficit, discussed in chapter three, seems again to return inscription and marking to a kind of silence; Ahasuerus is scarred by God's mark and yet yields only a vacant, anti-predictive prophecy. Indeed, something analogous occurs in the case of Blake, in chapter four, when prophecy in *Milton* becomes a “blank in Nature” (*Milton* 8.21-22). This suspension of determination through prophecy, finally, gestures toward the more violent repudiation of female prophecy described in chapter five in the context of Caroline Lamb and Mary Shelley—a case of prophecy disclosing temporality only through the ripples created by the texts' efforts to repudiate prophecy. All of these texts present prophecy as a tension generated in the expression of an impossible expression, where this interruption emerges only very subtly in phenomenological, linguistic, and formal terms.

## II. Ironic Historiography and Prophetic History in Kant

There is a deep irony in moving from a concept of prophecy as clear, reliable foresight to prophecy as radical silence, absence, and uncertainty—an irony that recalls Kierkegaard's description of irony as “infinite absolute negativity” (*Irony* 259). Romantic prophecy, in fact, is not accidentally related to this kind of negativity but could be defined as ironic historiography. Much depends upon a closer analysis of existential irony, then, since it forms the ‘ground’ both for prophecy's radical ambivalence and its corrosive temporality, its resistance to the kind of narrative coherence that disciplines time through an essentially spatial mapping.

While *The Concept of Irony* represents an extended elaboration on infinite absolute negativity, the concept is in fact borrowed from Hegel's description of Romantic irony in the *Aesthetics*:

Solger was not content, like others, with superficial philosophical culture; on the contrary[,] his genuinely speculative inmost need impelled him to plumb the depths of the philosophical Idea. In this process he came to the dialectical moment of the Idea, to the point which I call "infinite absolute negativity," to the activity of the Idea in so negating itself as infinite and universal as to become finitude and particularity, and in nevertheless canceling this negation in turn and so reestablishing the universal and infinite in the finite and particular. To this negativity Solger firmly clung, and of course it is *one element* in the speculative Idea, yet interpreted as this purely dialectical unrest and dissolution of both infinite and finite, only *one element*, and not, as Solger will have it, the *whole* Idea.

Unfortunately Solger's life was broken off too soon for him to have been able to reach the concrete development of the philosophical Idea. So he got no further than this aspect of negativity which has an affinity with the ironic dissolution of the determinate and the inherently substantial alike, and in which he also saw the principle of artistic activity. (1.68-69)

It is useful here to emphasize that Hegel's distaste for irony is not a result of irony's negativity or its suspension of the actual—for it is only through a thoroughgoing negation that the universal and the particular achieve the productive synthesis Hegel, in the *Phenomenology*, calls "individuality." Rather, he is critical of stalling the dialectic in its negative moment, of failing to negate the negation, thereby remaining in abstraction. Later in the *Aesthetics* Hegel makes clear that the problem, then, is not irony's negativity but its *inactivity*, its refusal to put negation to work or to make negation effective in a project that would involve concretization: a "purely universal consciousness" of the sort indulged by irony, after all, "cannot attain to any specific action" (2.1209). The ironic shape of consciousness "ends in mere heartfelt longing instead of acting and doing," suffers a kind of hypochondriac melancholy that "will not let itself go into actual action and production, because it is frightened of being polluted by contact with finitude,

although at the same time it senses the deficiency of this abstraction” (1.159, 1.160). Irony is thus too “one-sided” (1.160), anticipating Hegel’s criticism of Kant, since its form of negation remains too purely ideal. Hence, Hegel’s real problem with irony has to do with its *lack* of negativity or its non-dialectical attempt to take what is merely subjective as the ground or foundation of philosophy: that is, irony begins to look like the foundationalism expounded by intellectual intuition, if that concept is not properly tempered by mediation.<sup>23</sup> For while intellectual intuition represents an advance over Kant’s “optimistic form of skepticism” (Kojève 109) insofar as it asserts a fundamental continuity in knowledge—asserting that thought *can* know itself and its own conditions of possibility, that thought can be Absolute in a way Kant’s paradigm necessarily denied—Hegel is nevertheless wary of any intellectual intuition that would operate in a purely *positive* mode or that would claim that actual knowledge of what actually exists is available to consciousness *immediately*.

Kierkegaard, however, seems to find in irony’s hyper-negativity a more ambivalent relationship to actuality, a relationship that is useful for describing prophecy and, as discussed in connection with Ernst Bloch in chapter five, concrete utopia. That is, ironic negativity seems, for Kierkegaard, to be meaningful and historically effective even if its negativity is resolutely workless. For this is the key to how revolution can be revolutionized: ironic negativity can suspend the drive to make all negativity productive in the name of an overarching project, therein opening the possibility of *a new project all together*, rather than committing subjectivity and history to an augmentation of the *status quo*. Glossing Hegel, Kierkegaard remarks that “irony *sensu eminentiori* is directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions” (*Irony* 254). Irony at this level is existential, a way of being in the world—or of *not* being in the world—rather than something merely

---

<sup>23</sup> In fact, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel will define Romantic irony explicitly as a product of Fichte’s attempt to unify intuition and intellect in pure subjectivity:

Now this form of subjectivism [i.e., Probabilistic] is irony, the consciousness that this principle of conviction is not worth much and that, lofty criterion though it be, it is only caprice that governs it. This attitude is really a product of Fichte’s philosophy, which proclaims that the Ego is absolute, i.e. is absolute certainty, the “universal self-hood” which advances through a course of further development to objectivity. Of Fichte himself it cannot properly be said that he made subjective caprice a guiding principle in ethics, but, later on, this principle of the mere particular, in the sense of “a particular self-hood,” was deified by Friedrich von Schlegel with reference to the good and the beautiful. (258)

verbal or rhetorical. In words that anticipate Blanchot's description of prophecy, Kierkegaard continues that "the whole of existence [becomes] alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject in turn [becomes] alien to existence" (*Irony* 259). In fact, "actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject" such that "he himself has to a certain degree become unactual" (*Irony* 259). Kierkegaard's ironic subject is closest to Blanchot's prophet when Kierkegaard explicitly addresses the prophetic quality of this irony:

For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea. He is the one who must pass judgment. In one sense the ironist is certainly prophetic, because he is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know. He is prophetic, but his position and situation are the reverse of the prophet's. (261)

Blanchot's reading would, then, reverse this reversal and read the prophet and the prophetic mode as a kind of Kierkegaardian irony,<sup>24</sup> opening a new way to think about the performance of prophecy in Romanticism as a certain dis-actualization or a detotalization in the hermeneutic relation to history as an object of figuration. After all, in irony "the ironic figure of speech cancels itself [...] inasmuch as the one who is speaking assumes that his hearers understand him, and thus, through a negation of the immediate phenomenon, the essence becomes identical with the phenomenon" (*Irony* 248). That is, Kierkegaard follows Hegel and yet deviates from his logic at a crucial moment: when the ironist experiences a contradiction in the relationship between his actual and his ideal conditions, this does *not*, as it would for Hegel, *necessarily* mean that the subject works to reconcile this contradiction by refashioning the actual in an effort to actualize the ideal. Rather, in a gesture recalling Schelling's more recursive and tortured dialectic, Kierkegaard imagines that this contradiction *becomes* actual *as* contradiction in a way that threatens Hegel's picture of history as the progressive, inevitable amelioration of contradictions through work.

---

<sup>24</sup> "Impossible, the reconciliation of the Sacred with speech demanded that the poet's existence come nearest to non-existence. That is when, for one moment, it itself seemed possible, when, before foundering, it agreed to assert itself in song" ("Sacred" 131).



The Romantic prophet is an ironic historian; in spite of itself, historiography's aspiration to narrative coherence is precisely what historiography's prophetic strain suspends, just as irony, for Paul de Man, resides within but "is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative" (*Aesthetic* 179). Hence, the breach in history the prophet makes, the subtraction of historical continuity and present actuality through his or her *supplementation* of narrative, introduces *désœuvrement* or Blanchot's notion of worklessness *into* the very historiography that would aim to turn all negation into production. So, while "Socratic questioning is clearly, even though remotely, analogous to the negative in Hegel" one key difference is that "the negative, according to Hegel, is a necessary element in thought itself, is a determinant *as intra* [inwardly]" whereas with Socrates "the negative is made graphic and placed outside the object in the inquiring individual" (*Irony* 35). This sense of standing outside of a system aims to separate ironic negation from dialectical negativity or determinate negation, in effect displacing the immanent continuity attributed by Kierkegaard to the negative in Hegel's paradigm:

For irony, everything becomes nothing, but nothing can be taken in several ways. The speculative nothing is the vanishing at every moment with regard to the concretion, since it is itself the craving of the concrete, its *nisus formativus* [formative impulse]; the mystic nothing is a nothing with regard to the representation, a nothing that nevertheless is just as full of content as the silence of the night is full of sounds for someone who has ears to hear [i.e. negative theology]. Finally, the ironic nothing is the dead silence in which irony walks again and haunts (the latter word taken altogether ambiguously). (*Irony* 258)

This ironic negativity, then, represents a certain kind of freedom from work and teleology. Indeed Socrates, like the Romantic revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century, seems concerned to shatter the determinism and fatality of the Greek *kosmos* and to open the way to a concept of free action. And yet irony alone only offers what Kierkegaard—echoing Hegel's criticism—will call negative freedom, a product of prophetic enthusiasm's absorption in pure possibility:

In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in

which the given actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such suspended, because there is nothing that holds him. But this very freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities, and if he needs any consolation for everything that is destroyed, he can have recourse to the enormous reserve fund of possibility. (*Irony* 262)

For Kierkegaard, this negative freedom and ironic enthusiasm describes Romanticism as a whole: “throughout this whole discussion I use the terms ‘irony’ and ‘ironist’; I could just as well say ‘romanticism’ and ‘romanticist’” (*Irony* 275n). And while he will, like Hegel, suggest that it betrays a failure in the dialectical method—an insistence on the negative to the exclusion of the affirmative (although this ‘problem’ might be reconsidered as a precursor to negative dialectics<sup>25</sup>)—he also acknowledges that Romantic irony is appropriate to its cultural situation, as a corrective to the empty progressivism of science; in the context of Tieck’s irony, for instance, Kierkegaard admits that “the world was in its dotage and had to be rejuvenated” and “in that respect, romanticism was beneficial” (*Irony* 304).

However, if Kierkegaard will ultimately aim to curtail Romantic irony in a move that parallels prophecy’s management of temporality through identification with prediction, the pervasive irony of his own text tends to displace such containment.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Negativity is part of what Kierkegaard during the period of writing *Christian Discourses* (1847) called his ‘inverted dialectic’ (JP. 1:760)” (Burgess 159).

<sup>26</sup> Niels Thulstrup in *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel* raises a similar objection to the dialectically recuperative readings of Kierkegaard’s irony. Despite attaching his proper name to *The Concept of Irony*, Thulstrup argues that Kierkegaard produces, in fact, a kind of pseudonomous text. Kierkegaard, says Thulstrup, “as an experiment wished to try his hand at the role of a Hegelian historian of philosophy” (261) even though he was in fact no Hegelian at all. As Thulstrup details with impressive historical precision, Kierkegaard’s understanding of Hegel, at the time of his dissertation’s production, was spotty, largely second-hand, and heavily mediated by Danish philosophers like J.L. Heiberg, Frederick Christian Sibbern, Poul Martin Moller, H.L. Martenson, D.G. Monard, and Christian Molbech, and theologians like H.N. Clausen. Hence, while “it is still possible that through secondary sources Kierkegaard had obtained a kind of understanding of Hegel” (56), his contact with primary texts seemed to be, at least up to 1835, quite limited. Hence, if Kierkegaard is in some respects experimenting or playing with the idea of being an Hegelian, Thulstrup sees an opening for a more ironic reading of his treatment of Hegel’s treatment of irony:

Kierkegaard, with such [existential as opposed to Hegelian] opinions, which [...] are only hinted at in that work [i.e., *The Concept of Irony*], was not a Hegelian, but one who as an experimenter chose the indirect method, chose to appear as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, to play the role of a Hegelian historian of philosophy. This looked so artless and harmless—and in the course of time some allowed themselves to be deceived by the costume, have in complete seriousness believed of

Indeed, Kant faces a very similar problem when he attempts to employ and yet curb enthusiasm in an effort to prophesy the future in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. For just as Kierkegaard's concept of irony introduces a potentially endless reflexivity into history, so Kant's reflexive, dualistic philosophy—a kind of structurally ironic philosophy—gestures toward its own immanent irony in the very same moment as it claims to predict the future. That is, within Kant's work, there are significant hints that *discontinuity* or fragmentation operates *as the very form of* metaphysical 'completeness,' specifically in his treatment of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique* and the Sign of History in later "historical political texts" including *The Conflict*, or what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls Kant's "fourth *Critique*" (*Differend* xiii).<sup>27</sup> This reflects the ambivalence of prophetic determination as an agent both of insistent regularization and a symptom of the crisis in rational completion. For, Kant's system will permit prediction only insofar as it also makes concrete or empirically verifiable prediction impossible. Indeed, Kant draws attention to the central place of irony in his metaphysics through rhetorical ironies. For instance, "To Perpetual Peace" opens with a literally ironic prophecy of history—"a certain Dutch shopkeeper's sign, on which a graveyard is painted" (107) as a joke about 'perpetual peace'—gesturing not only to that other, more complicated Sign in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, discussed below, but also hinting at the latter's ironic dimensions. In fact, just as biting sarcasm proliferates in the section concerning philosophy's relationship to theology, Kant's discussion of history and prophecy in this text is frequently incongruous and even comical. Specifically, the section called "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" is book-ended with ironic prophecies.

---

Kierkegaard, the master of irony, that his outside, the academic dissertation *On the Concept of Irony*, full of scholarship and perspicacity, was also his inside. That is a strange misunderstanding of a thinker who could not only write a book about irony but who could also use irony himself. (260)

<sup>27</sup> Indeed it is Lyotard, in his essay "The Sign of History" and throughout *The Differend* who draws attention to the strange status of the Sign of History in Kant's thought. For Kant himself, the issue figures only briefly in *The Conflict* the context of thinking about the relationship between the philosophy faculty and the law faculty as a kind of allegory, perhaps, for the problem (that is, the impossibility that is nevertheless demanded by reason itself) of *legislating ideas*. In fact, the connection to the French Revolution as an example of this difficult relation and its concomitant affects remains only implicit in Kant while Lyotard brings it to the surface. In other words, the possibility of reading *The Conflict* in terms of a theory of history requires Lyotard's mediation even as reading the Sign as a kind of prophecy goes beyond the terms of Lyotard's analysis.

In the opening, for instance, Kant comments, “it was all very well for the Jewish prophets to prophesy that sooner or later not simply decadence but complete dissolution awaited their state, for they themselves were the authors of this fate” (*Conflict* 143). As Peter Fenves elaborates, this kind of prophecy involves not vatic fullness but rather forgetting; prophecy coincides with the prophet’s *ignorance* concerning his or her causal role in what he or she ‘predicts’:

Such *forgetfulness* is the condition for the possibility of all previous prophecy, not only in the various predictions of everyday life but even in the divination that claims access to a divine ground. When recounted from a position of utter awareness, the forgetfulness of prophets turns their very announcement into jest, and so the account of successful prophecy always appears as an ironic narrative of the impossibility of prophecy. (*Fate* 185)

The irony of the Hebrew prophets involves, then, an artificial discontinuity between prediction and empirical actuality. Something slightly different, however, takes place in the conclusion to Kant’s chapter with an irony based not on the secret determination of actuality by the prophet, but on the total unreliability of empirical data as such:

A doctor who consoled his patients from one day to the next with hopes of a speedy convalescence, pledging to one that his pulse beat better, to another an improvement in his stool, to a third the same regarding his perspiration, etc., received a visit from one of his friends. “How is your illness, my friend,” was his first question. “How should it be? I’m dying of improvement, pure and simple!” (*Conflict* 169)

Is this a metaphor for the historical hermeneutic Kant has just elaborated in terms of the Sign of History? If so, does it undermine confidence in his assurance that history, despite empirical evidence, is indeed progressing? Indeed, this prognosis seems to be perfectly at odds with the symptoms, making the doctor’s claim seem ridiculous. Does this make Kant’s historiographical prognosis of eventual improvement, with its perverse relationship to empirical events, similarly ridiculous? For, Kant’s answer to the question he poses—that, yes, humanity *is* progressing—seems to align itself with the irony of the doctor’s counterintuitive prognosis since this improvement is expressed, strangely, through empirical, regressive violence. Hence, it makes sense that, if in an earlier draft of

the *Conflict* (the so-called “Krakauer Fragment”) Kant, as Fenves says, “appears in precisely the position of—and with precisely the same function as—the Jewish prophets” (*Fate* 186 n8), that he should here appear in the position of this strangely optimistic doctor.<sup>28</sup>

\* \* \*

Turning to the matter placed between these anecdotal brackets, it is important to stress that the Sign of History is, itself, an ironic prophecy, a fragment in the ‘system’ of history. It is ironic not for any failure to be promissory (indeed, upon closer analysis, promises reveal themselves to be, in fact, the sort of fragmentary totality theorized in Jena Romanticism). Rather, the Sign of History plays a role in the historical and political context that is similar to the role of purposiveness in Kant’s third *Critique*. In other words, it describes a complex mode of contact, claiming to link different domains—not just the rational and the intuitive but the present and the future—only through a mode of non-relation. This demands closer attention, as it helps to see how the Sign of History, Kant’s explicit attempt to prophesy without foresight in precisely the mode of the Romantic prophet sketched here, reflects the structural irony of the Kantian architectonic. Irony is not simply a rhetorical mode that Kant might slip into or out of for stylistic effect but rather describes the form of all attempts at systematic totalization made from within a reflective idiom that must simultaneously forestall and fragment that same totalization.

In the third *Critique*, Kant identifies “purposiveness” as judgment’s autonomous concept responsible for offering palpable confirmation of the realizability of ideas—a concept that grounds aesthetic judgments of taste as well as teleological concepts of nature. Such a concept is necessary since the challenge facing Kant following the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* remained how to connect practical ideas to sensible intuition, a task apparently impossible and yet demanded by reason itself. As Kant puts it, “the concept of nature [or the domain of the

---

<sup>28</sup> Part of the complication with interpreting Kant on this point is that he seems to demand the reader to accept two antithetical positions. For, it is neither that empirical regression is merely apparent nor that general progress is merely apparent. In truly antinomic form, these mutually exclusive itineraries do not interfere with or relativize each other. Kant can say two different things at the same time—can, like the Biblical prophets discussed further in chapters two and three, both threaten and comfort in one breath.

understanding's categories] does indeed allow us to present its objects in intuition, but as mere appearances rather than as things in themselves, whereas the concept of freedom does indeed allow us to present its object as a thing in itself, but not in intuition" (*Judgement* 14). Reason must overcome this divide if ethics is to be considered more than a mere pipedream. So, for Kant,

[e]ven though the moral law has its origin in our pure reason (rather than in our experience of nature) and even though the freedom of our will has its place in the "supersensible" (or as [Kant] also calls it, the "noumenal") domain of things as they are in themselves rather than in the domain of appearances, the "final end" or purpose that morality sets for us [...] must nevertheless be realizable *in nature* and in accordance with its laws [that is, the final end must be able to appear within the forms of space and time and the categories of the understanding that make up the intuitable realm]. And *this* fact, [Kant] tells us, can be "cognized" or brought home to us by the power of judgment, through its concept of purposiveness. (Guyer x)<sup>29</sup>

Put differently, ideas need to be coordinated to phenomenal experience, at least in principle, such that their imminent realization becomes palpable; however, the very *tangibility* of objects in intuition *constitutes* the insuperable barrier to things-in-themselves, precisely because the unconditional cannot be rendered conditionally or understood in terms of the understanding's *a priori* forms of knowledge without being fundamentally distorted. But if the power of judgment—as the reflective judgment of the third *Critique*, rather than the merely legislative, determinant judgment of the first *Critique*—through its concept of purposiveness is supposed to span the gap here by serving as the felt presentation of the possibility of the realizability of ideas in nature, it has to perform this function *without* in fact reducing the idea to an appearance. Indeed, this is why prophecies are almost always presented in such cryptic terms.

---

<sup>29</sup> As Kant says toward the end of the second introduction of the third *Critique*, "the power of judgment [...] provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a **purposiveness** of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized" (81-82).

In Book Five of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example, in what Michael Ragussis calls "one of the most puzzling moments of all of Wordsworth's poetry," the speaker relates a dream<sup>30</sup>—really, Descartes' dream—of "strange freight" (5.84) designed "by its very nature to elude our grasp" (148, 149). Rather than offer an interpretation of this episode's contents, it is useful at this point to consider—in a larger sense—the necessity of its obscurity, that is, to read its obscurity itself as an expression of the essentially Kantian injunction that ideas cannot be rendered directly intuitible. The obscurity in prophetic episodes of this sort reflects Kant's insistence on the negative presentation of ideas or the fragmentary 'unity' of his system. Hence, in this episode, the stone (geometry) and the shell (poetry), eternal forces that counterpoint the finitude of human productions—"those palms atchieved [sic]/ Through length of time, by study and hard thought" so frail that one "might almost 'weep to have' what he may lose" (5.5-7, 25)—manage to sound "A loud prophetic blast of harmony" on the sensuous ear only in a strangely "unknown tongue," betraying at once its characterization as "articulate sounds" (5.96, 94, 95). Likewise, in Kant we are supposed, strangely, to feel reason itself in a deflected and indirect presentation of ideas—that is, in ideas' 'actual possible' realization, where what is actual *is the possibility of* realization and not realization itself. Precisely this issue of intuiting without feeling—or feeling without feeling—reflects the ironic economy in Kant's system that, when highlighted, clarifies the relationship between what Kant says in his Critical works and what he says in his later, prophetic comments on history in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

The promissory quality of purposiveness's mediation—that is, purposiveness as a guarantee of an agreement between reason and appearances, where it is the *guarantee* and *not the actual agreement* that is cognizable—is a perspective that stretches analogy (as in Wordsworth's dream where rocks and shells are massively overdetermined) to its limits. The apparent contingency of aesthetic experience and nature itself is treated *as if* it were part of an organized whole. This whole is represented, analogically, as something akin to but infinitely more powerful than human understanding. So, while purposiveness does not claim to represent something *in* nature as such, it does offer the subject an orientation

---

<sup>30</sup> In the 1850 version, the text shifts from the third to the first person such that the speaker shifts from the auditor to the teller of the tale.

toward nature. With purposiveness, the demand of rational totality offers reflective judgment a guide—an *as if* (contingency were rational) that judgment's reflections can follow in order to allow theoretical reason to coincide with practical reason or the higher horizon of moral ideas. As Kant notes, "this transcendental concept of a purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor a concept of freedom [...] but rather only represents the unique way in which we must proceed in reflection on the objects of nature with the aim of [facilitating] a thoroughly interconnected experience" (*Judgement* 71).

This is why aesthetics becomes part of the focus for the third *Critique*, for "without being transformed into a moral experience, the aesthetic experience of beauty nevertheless offers some palpable confirmation of our more abstract presupposition of the conditions of the possibility of morality" (Guyer xvi). Beauty, as another kind of sign or what Kant calls "hypotyposis," thus confirms a universal purposiveness in this gesture while—since aesthetics does not impose determinate judgments and since beauty in particular is a mode of judging without a concept—at the same time withholding a determinate purpose. After all, beauty can claim subjective universality since it is based *not* on an agreement concerning contingent data (i.e., whether subjects agree about the relative beauty of an object) but on a universalizable cognitive process, expressing the *a priori* harmony of the understanding's categories with nature—a capacity or power common to all subjects. The sublime, likewise, offers a sensible sign of universal coherence, although this coherence comes about in a counterintuitive mode of presentation by the imagination: "the experience of the sublime is the feeling (rather than mere idea) of our own power of reason, which is precisely what makes it an aesthetic experience, and palpable evidence for the existence of that faculty of mind that is presupposed but not actually experienced in morality itself" (Guyer xv). Hence, Kant notes that "the beautiful seems to be taken as the presentation of an indeterminate concept of the understanding, but the sublime as that of a similar concept of reason" (128), such that each brings theoretical and practical ideas, through their respective faculties, into a relationship with something intuitable, without determining or objectifying their respective ideas.



Put differently, aesthetic judgment aims to address the problem that Kantians have often faced concerning the motivation guiding an ethical scheme as purely formal as the categorical imperative. As Dale Snow notes,

[i]n order to be truly free, man's essence must be outside all causal connections and thus independent of time: nothing determines it but itself. It is a classic conundrum of Kantian moral theory that the good will is described as resisting all influence from inclinations, whether benign or malign, and determining itself by means of the moral law alone. Students of Kant have long been confessing themselves stymied by the notion of determination to action by reason alone; in fact we may speculate that enough of the original students of Kant found this a stumbling block that Kant attempted to clarify his meaning by invoking the feeling of respect for the moral law. This is not an inclination, Kant reminds us, but a pure feeling. A pure feeling—this expression, verging as it does on the oxymoronic, reflects Kant's struggles to capture the sense of self which we undeniably do have especially strongly at moments of moral choice. (170)

The “pure feeling” of respect reflects the precarious if also crucial place of feeling as a vanishing mediator of sorts between pure theoretical understanding and pure practical reason, for it is just as important that that Law be *felt* (as opposed to thought) as that this feeling gesture, sign-like, toward an ethical ideal that is always beyond all intuition or feeling.

Kant's concept of the historical Sign represents a prophecy of historical progress that attempts to form a similar kind of bridge—so, an ambivalent, fragmentary, and treacherous bridge—between ideas and appearances as that provided by purposiveness in aesthetic judgment.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the understanding here confronts some of the same

---

<sup>31</sup> Kant's Sign continues his complication of semiotics begun in the third *Critique*, where he displaces the intuitive content of schematic hypotyposis with symbolic hypotyposis: a way of expressing concepts not through intuitions but through an *analogy to* intuitions. In other words, symbolic hypotyposis is not the attempt to feel ideas; rather, it is the attempt to export the kinds of laws or schemas that govern intuitive data to a realm of relations—relations between concepts—that exist outside intuitions. This would be something like *formal* synesthesia: using the schema offered by, say, taste but in another sensory context, like sound. This is rather different than saying Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is savory in any literal way—although it is clear how such analogies can become metaphors very easily. Instead it means to take the

paradoxes as it did in the third *Critique*, in that this historical Sign claims to offer palpable confirmation of the idea of progress without itself embodying actual progress.<sup>32</sup> The *Begebenheit* responds to the “desire” for “a fragment of human history and one, indeed, that is drawn not from the past but future time” (*Conflict* 141) that would guarantee history’s progress. In Kant’s words, this index of history “would have to be considered not itself as the cause of history, but only as an intimation, a historical sign (*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*) demonstrating the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety, that is, seen not as [a sum of] individuals (for that would yield an interminable enumeration and computation), but rather as divided into nations and states (as it is encountered on earth)” (*Conflict* 151). So, for example, the apparently regressive events of the French Revolution serve as a sign of progress *not* because the actual Revolution marks an improvement in material life but because the events disclose, simultaneously, a feeling and a will amongst observers that transcends the determinate situation. This feeling may remain unconscious or “incognizant” (151) but, nevertheless, it signifies the rational idea of sustained peace on earth. Hence, ‘reading’ history demands a special kind of exegesis: what emerges here is a prophecy of progress that is akin to purposiveness’ (implicit) prophecy in the third *Critique* to unite theoretical and practical realms, the *as if* formula modeling the kind of totality reason can seek only *indirectly* through contingent historical circumstances.

More specifically, the higher aims of the human race are, as noted, observable in the experience of sympathy that an observer feels for one or another side in a conflict. This is “a universal yet disinterested sympathy” (*Conflict* 153), says Kant, recalling

---

‘rules’ of taste (bitterness diminishes flavors, saltiness can intensify sweetness, etc) and apply these kinds of *relations* to another realm of objects or another set of data. In fact, this example is inadequate in that Kant’s symbolic hypotyposis would go one step further: rather than applying the relationships in one sense-field to another, he would aim to use the relations within intuition *as such* as a model for a realm outside intuition altogether. This brings us back to *The Conflict* in that the Sign of History is similarly ambivalent with respect to intuition. For, as noted, this Sign attempts to link intuitive, actual historical experience and rational realms—the idea of progress—via a very dislocated form of analogy, that is, via an apophatic mode of affect that inspires a concept of history’s progress but only insofar as, in the final analysis, it repudiates its intuitive basis.

<sup>32</sup> When Kant talks about the very existence of the Sign as evidence of progress—because it can emerge as a sign only if progress has already been made—this is not to say that the Sign stops being a sign. It may well be that that capacity for enthusiasm relies on a certain level of moral development; but this development is not to be understood as the end of progress or the apex of the realization of ideas in nature.

aesthetic judgment's disinterestedness, since public expression of this sympathy could prove extremely risky for the observer. As Gary Aylesworth explains,

[b]ecause the public display of enthusiasm for the Revolution is contrary to the self-interest of the spectators [...] it is a sign of progress in the development of the moral faculty [even though] as a motivating passion, it is ethically condemned, since if it were to affect our disposition to act, our will would not be purely motivated by law. Thus, for Kant, enthusiasm for the French Revolution may be uplifting as a sign (*Begebenheit*) of human progress (i.e., moral development), but is condemnable if it becomes a motive for joining the revolutionaries. (92)

The same event can figure, to use Lyotard's terms, in two different phrase regimes or in two different registers simultaneously. In one, the Revolution is condemnable; in the other, it generates a laudable sign, a hint that Reason and actual history must, at some point, coincide. Hence, while the material, historical situation becomes a rather unreliable horizon for answering the question, "is the human race progressing?", there remains a kind of feeling—bound up with but separable from historical events—that is responsible for disclosing the possibility of the idea of progress. The *Begebenheit*, this feeling or affect, then, is *not* itself the idea of progress rendered immediately palpable but, like purposiveness, is a concept that aims to show history *could* realize this idea, or that history is *capable* of progress...eventually.

The prophetic Sign of History has, in other words, an ironic, double voice as well as a radically discontinuous temporality. Rather than synthesizing the contingent and the rational, it suggests that contingency and rationality continue to phrase the 'same' historical events according to their own regimes despite the mutually exclusive consequences, such that history can always appear to be "dying of improvement." For Lyotard, this is not so much a problem with the Kantian system as it is a resource—which is to say that Kant's permanent parabasis, the double-voiced quality of irony's irony, is for Lyotard an opportunity to theorize various discontinuities. As Georgess van den Abbeele notes, "Lyotard is able to theorize dissonant forms of ethical and political activism *beyond the politics of consensus and representation*"—that is, beyond Hegelian ideology that puts all negativity to work—thanks precisely to "the reputedly static

antithetic and dialectic” of Kant’s system (xi, my emphasis). That is, the absolute ambivalence the Sign of History represents, as both regressive and progressive, is exactly the kind of tension that allows for “the theorization of nontraditional models of dissent (or ‘dissensus,’ as Lyotard liked to say) and unrepresentable cases of injustice (eventually, his notion of the ‘differend’)” (van den Abbeele xii). Lyotard aims, in other words, not to sublimate Kant’s internal conflicts, but rather—in Lyotard’s metaphor—to navigate between various islands in an “archipelago” of phrases “like an outfitter or an admiral who launches expeditions” (*Enthusiasm* 12). In other words, contact between these self-contained and perhaps conflicting realms does not mean smashing islands together by some manipulation of geological tectonics—or philosophical architectonics—but accepts, rather, a persistent heterogeneity.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of the historical sign more precisely, the promise (of synthesis) manifests itself as a peculiar feeling, a species of sympathy, analogous to the sublime: namely, as *enthusiasm*—a pejorative term, routinely ascribed to prophetic revolutionaries in the eighteenth century, suggesting a lack of mature thought.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Kant notes, in

<sup>33</sup> While Lyotard aims to maintain conceptual fidelity with Kant in a number of ways, his emphasis on the discontinuity in Kant’s system and the suspension of Reason’s metanarrative takes Kantian thought in a direction that Kant himself would be reluctant to accept. For Kant remains committed to the idea of totality that Lyotard suspends. And Kant would certainly reject the notion of complete heterogeneity of the domains. After all, this disjunction only appears in Kant *against* his persistent efforts to unify (although in a strangely oblique, disunited way) intuition and reason.

<sup>34</sup> The distance between the Sign of History as a kind of reasonable enthusiasm and *Schwärmerei* (fanaticism) is for Kant impossible to maintain, as the former seems actively to solicit the latter. This corroborates Jon Mee’s description of the socio-political dimensions of the Romantic discourse surrounding terms like “enthusiasm” and “fanaticism.” As Mee notes, “the context of the 1790s” more widely serves as “a crucial period in the development of the idea that enlightenment *transparence* itself might be a species of enthusiasm” (18)—the notion that general education might promote counter-cultural movements. Hence, Mee traces the dialectic between enthusiasm and its regulation through the eighteenth century, charting its pejoration by political conservatives and subsequent (but very qualified) amelioration in Romanticism. In political discourse, Mee argues, to label someone an “enthusiast” was to suggest that his or her ecstasy threatened not only the state but also the notion of subjectivity itself—threats that recall the perceived danger of Socrates’ irony and the “infinitely light playing” that “gives the arbitrary *I* free-reign in ironic self-satisfaction” (*Irony* 270, 296) in Schlegel. As Mee writes,

This influx of divine power was also seen to involve a dangerous dissolution of subjectivity in which, as Nigel Smith puts it, “the distinction between individual utterance and Scriptural authority dissolves.” Thus, paradoxically, the arrogance of the enthusiast involved the destruction of his or her proper self. The apocalyptic ecstasies of the prophet threatened the continuous self-identity that so much eighteenth-century writing sought to affirm. Enthusiasm threatened a stable subjectivity as much as it did the stability of the body politic. (28)

While this may indeed capture the general sense of the time, Mee’s statement is somewhat misleading: enthusiasm offers a mode of subjectivity *of a different sort*, one that from a Kantian perspective, as discussed above, must look paradoxical and unstable but that aims, in fact, at something more sure—i.e., absolute—than Kant was able to offer. Yet this perceived instability promoted discipline in a variety of

combination with a republican constitution, “the passionate participation in the good, i.e., enthusiasm, (although not to be wholly esteemed, since passion as such deserves censure), provide[s] through this history the occasion for the following remark [...]: genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral, such as the concept of right, and it cannot be grafted onto self-interest” (*Conflict* 155). In other words, enthusiasm is the prophetic feeling *par excellence*. Yet, it has, like aesthetic feelings, to stop short of becoming an interested feeling, just as purposiveness for Kant stops short of determining an actual purpose in aesthetic judgment. Indeed, a closer look at the third *Critique* reveals how Kant’s attempt to negotiate between sublime enthusiasm—something that echoes Shaftesbury’s concept of enthusiasm as a prerequisite for thought—and a more dangerous *Schwärmerei* serves as an attempt to regulate and discipline his own form of prophecy. As Kant says in Section 29 of the third *Critique*, enthusiasm is an “affect” rather than a “passion”: “[affects] are related merely to feeling; [passions] belong to the faculty of desire [...]. [Affects] are tumultuous and unpremeditated, [passions] sustained and considered” (*Judgment* 154). Proper enthusiasm, while it seems to be excited at the prospect of ideas, lacks the hubris, as it were, of a passion that would seek to determine the idea sensuously—and therein fall victim to a transcendental illusion by ascribing thought’s categories to reality itself. Kant suggests, then, that “enthusiasm is aesthetically sublime because it is a stretching of the powers through ideas, which give the mind a momentum that acts far more powerfully and persistently than the impetus given by sensory representations” (*Judgment* 154). In other words, there is a reasonable amount of feeling—quantified as affect—that can

---

forms, including psychological diagnosis: “‘Distraction’ became a key word in describing its [i.e., enthusiasm’s] psychological effects. Oscillating between the gloominess of the Puritan and the sensuality of the antinomian (often in the same person), it came to be regarded as a form of madness” (29). This madness speaks further to the medicalization of the term: “By 1735 this threat [of religious zeal] did not even need to be religious. Once the term was medicalized, it was free to be attached to any kind of socially disruptive mania” (Mee 31). Recalling the Sign of History, enthusiasm also became associated with a breach in empirical methodology: the subjective claim to transcendent insight is not subject to scientific verification as it can not enter the public sphere. “‘Demonstration’ to others rather than personal ‘perswasion’ was crucial to Lockean psychology as the means of proving the truth of one’s sensations. The idea of enthusiasm as resistant to the kind of public dialogue that demonstration entailed was a recurrent theme of eighteenth-century writing on the matter” (Mee 37). Such fears meant that “the possibility of a positive definition of enthusiasm oriented towards the unworlding of things-as-they-are remained available, but always haunted by a fear that unworlding was at best unworldly and at worst subversive” (Mee 43)—just as Kierkegaard’s “controlled irony” is haunted by the abyss of irony or Kant’s “genuine enthusiasm” by *Schwärmerei*.

attend thought's movement beyond the sensible, or that might spur the "the mind to soar above **certain** obstacles by means of moral principles" (*Judgment* 154, Kant's emphasis).

The presentation of this feeling guarantees human progress—the movement toward perpetual peace, or "the combination of the greatest possible virtue with the greatest possible happiness of all humanity" (Guyer x)—because it proves that humans *have the capacity for a peaceful society*. This mere having-the-capacity-for, expressed in the feeling of this ability or potential, is in other words the substance of the assurance; for, as Lyotard describes Kant's position, "if the history of humanity were but sound and fury, it would have to be admitted that this same nature that placed the 'seeds' of reason in man also prohibits man, through its own disorder, from developing the effects of those seeds in reality. Which is [for Kant] contradictory" (*Differend* 163). As such, the *Begebenheit* marks a confusing prophecy: immediate improvement cannot be expected to manifest itself in empirical situations nor is it to be solicited through participation in actual, violent revolution. So, if Kant asserts that history is indeed progressing, the empirical realization of this progress remains frustratingly indeterminate with respect to time.<sup>35</sup> After all, for Kant "revolutionary politics is based on a transcendental illusion in the political domain, confusing what can be presented as an object for a speculative and/or ethical phrase—in other words it confuses schemata or examples with *analogia*. The progress of a common being for the better is not to be judged on the basis of empirical intuition, but on the basis of signs" ("Sign" 168). Hence, the time of the progress to-come is never specified or determinable—it is *always* to-come. Or, as Kant says, "so far as time is concerned, it can promise this [actual progress] only indefinitely and as a contingent event" (*Conflict* 159). In other words, there is a sense that, just as the strength of the promise is untouched by regressive, empirical violence it is, at the same time, also perhaps perpetually suspended in its active promising. And yet, this does not make the prophecy less 'true' or cancel the promise of eventual and perpetual peace, as

---

<sup>35</sup> "Now I claim to be able to predict to the human race—even without prophetic insight—according to the aspects and omens of our day, the attainment of this goal [i.e., a republican constitution]. That is, I predict its progress toward the better which, from now on, turns out to be no longer completely retrogressive. For such a phenomenon in human history *is not to be forgotten* [Kant's emphasis], because it has revealed a tendency and a faculty in human nature for improvement such that no politician, affecting wisdom, might have conjured out of the course of things hitherto existing, and one which nature and freedom alone, united in the human race in conformity with inner principles of right, could have promised. *But so far as time is concerned, it can promise this only indefinitely and as a contingent event* [my emphasis]" (*Conflict* 159).

suspension in no way undermines the promise as such. As Kant notes, in terms that strongly parallel the description of ironic, Romantic prophecy as the insistence of discontinuity and the revocation of certainty, “philosophical prophecy still would lose nothing of its force” (*Conflict* 159) even if what it promises cannot have its fulfillment historically or temporally specified.

If enthusiasm describes the feeling of transcending feeling—something akin to the oxymoronic “pure feeling” of respect for the moral law—the danger enthusiasm generates lies in the possibility of feeling’s persistence into the supersensible.<sup>36</sup> That is, if enthusiasm “is a modality,” in fact, “an extreme form of the sublime feeling” (“Sign” 171, 172), its real virtue lies in its spectacular impotence. As Lyotard says of enthusiasm—although it could be said of the sublime as well—“the attempt to provide a presentation not only fails [...] but also, so to speak, is reversed or inverted so as to provide a supremely paradoxical presentation, which Kant calls a ‘simply negative presentation,’ and which he characterizes with some audacity as a ‘presentation of the infinite’” (“Sign” 172). In the sublime the imagination’s failure to present ideas is itself expressed as a painful pleasure, ‘pleasure’ in a non-sensuous and disinterested register since this concerns the play *between* reason and understanding rather than anything *in* sensible intuition. In Kant’s words from the third *Critique*, in the sublime “the imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that reason can never be anything other than a merely negative presentation, which nevertheless expands the soul” (156, my emphasis). Similarly, enthusiasm is considered “genuine” only if it collapses or curtails its attempt to realize ideas, only if it keeps its distance from the unconditional. Enthusiasm, like aesthetic feeling more broadly, in its attempt to offer palpable evidence of the realizability of rational ideas, has to be *maintained*, but equally *disciplined* or rigorously curbed.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> I consider this problem again in chapter two when time, in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, ‘appears’ only as the impalpable power or potentiality of sensitivity, leaving the speaker with an impression without content or an invisible mark intuited only in or through its impalpability.

<sup>37</sup> This conflicting relationship between feeling and numbness sets into play a psychological economy that will be rewritten in Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the superego as the agency that demands the subject enjoy...but not too much.

Behind enthusiasm's ambivalent attitude toward ideals lies prophecy's ambivalent relationship to prediction. Just as prophecy's narrative supplementation intensifies the very temporal and historical discontinuity it is supposed to ameliorate, so is enthusiasm divided between promising and yet empirically repudiating historical progress. Prophecy's schizophrenic structure is thus rewritten in Kant in terms of enthusiasm's barely restrained fanaticism, its oddly necessarily self-conflicting stance as a guarantee that relies on the *absence of* empirical evidence of the future it imagines in order to sustain this guarantee. In Lyotard's words, "*Schwärmerei* gives rise to an illusion, to 'seeing something beyond all limits of sensibility,' i.e., to thinking that there is a presentation when there is not. It makes a non-critical transition which is comparable to the transcendental illusion (the illusion of knowing something beyond all the limits of knowledge). Enthusiasm, on the other hand, sees nothing, or rather sees *the* nothing and refers it to the unrepresentable" ("Sign" 173). "Genuine enthusiasm," then, as opposed to the fanaticism of *Schwärmerei*, seems to intuit ideas but then, like Oedipus, to pluck out its own eyes, to collapse under its own limitations like the sublimed imagination.<sup>38</sup> So there are blind Greek prophets even in Kant. The *Schwärmer*, by contrast, enjoys his or her obscenity, claims to feel ideas, or to be, in the case of history, engaged in making progress actually happen. Ultimately, then, Kant *does* rely on empirical corroboration for his claim that history is progressing, but relies on this data, as it were, apophatically: it is only in registering an affect—namely, enthusiasm—that flashes up but disappears just as quickly that Kant is able to add intuitive content to his otherwise merely formal idea of progress. Or as Lyotard puts it, while the reflective and cognitive phrases are heterogeneous they are also, in their very difference, compatible: "the same referent, a given phenomenon taken from the field of human history, may serve by way of example to present the object of the discourse of despair, but as a bit of guiding thread, it may also serve to present analogically the object of the discourse of emancipation" (*Enthusiasm* 25). With ironic flexibility, the historical phenomenon can, for Kant, say two diametrically opposed things at the same time, without generating, for him at least, either a dialectical (i.e, productive) contradiction or an utterly hopeless antinomy. Indeed, it is a

---

<sup>38</sup> Again, it is tempting to read this psychoanalytically: this self-laceration represents enthusiasm's commitment to restraining its own *jouissance*, of retreating from the Real of desire.



hopeful contradiction, as it were: phrases do *not* enter into a dialectical process and yet there remains an assurance—curiously, an assurance that is all the more self-assured for lack of empirical support—that reason's ideas will be realized, against all odds, in actual life.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Wordsworth's Gift of Prophecy

It remains nonetheless true that literature, beginning to become manifest to itself through the romantic declaration, will from now on bear in itself this question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form—a question and a task German romanticism, and particularly that of *The Athenaeum*, not only sensed but already clearly proposed—before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future.

—Maurice Blanchot, “The Athenaeum”

Biding time is wise, for in the end

It's Time that's going to settle accounts.

—Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Tower*

### I. “As are unheard by all but gifted ear”: Wordsworth's Apocalypse

Aside from Blake, Wordsworth stands out among the major Romantic poets as having perhaps the most obvious investment in the poetics of prophecy. Unlike Blake, however, Wordsworth's treatment of prophecy is explicitly aligned with the conventional sense of prophecy as prediction and positive knowledge, albeit in the mode of natural supernaturalism. This is in large part thanks to his treatment of memory as a broadly unifying and synthesizing operation. For instance, in his *Essays upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth, citing John Weever's *Discourse of Funeral Monuments*, notes that the practice of writing epitaphs “proceeded from the presage of fore-feeling of immortality, implanted in all men naturally” (27). The epitaph responds, in other words, to the sense of the soul's immortality that Wordsworth feels to be metaphysically necessary, an “offspring” (29) of reason itself. In fact, the very existence of funeral epitaphs becomes, for Wordsworth, empirical proof of the soul's supermundane future in that such objects symptomatically express something of the immortality immanent to reason:

If, then, in a creature endowed with the faculties of foresight and reason, the social affections could not have unfolded themselves uncountenanced by the faith that Man is an immortal being; and if, consequently, neither could the individual dying have had a desire to survive in the

remembrance of his fellows, nor on their side could they have felt a wish to preserve for future times vestiges of the departed; it follows, as a final inference, that without the belief in immortality, wherein these several desires originate, neither monuments nor epitaphs, in affectionate or laudatory commemoration of the deceased, could have existed in the world. (30)

Here, prophecy is identified—rather counterintuitively, and yet in perfect alignment with prophecy’s usual identification with conservative prediction—with memory. In this treatment, prophecy relates to the future as if that future were always already a memory. With the help of the epitaph, consciousness is able not merely to pay “tribute to a man as a human being” but—in a line that echoes the imagination’s sense of “something evermore about to be” (*Prelude* 6.542)<sup>39</sup>—“includes this general feeling and something more” (31). The epitaph thus seems to encompass and totalize time, to weave the past into the future and therein unify subjects across the discontinuous moments of their lives, gesturing ultimately to an enveloping plenitude beyond finite existence.

Memory becomes the form of Wordsworthian foreknowledge perhaps most explicitly in “Tintern Abbey.” For the speaker’s recollection of his youthful “dizzy raptures” (85) is, ultimately, converted into a promise of future restoration:

While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment here is life and food  
For future years. (62-65)

In fact, with the introduction of Dorothy toward the end of the poem, Wordsworth seems to gather time together or, to use his recurring figure, to *harmonize* different temporalities. That is, Wordsworth casts Dorothy as an image of his own youthful self, such that, as he says to her, “I behold in thee what I once was” (120). If this turns Dorothy’s present consciousness into Wordsworth’s past—a form of “animal” (74) consciousness, so he says, that had not achieved the self-consciousness of his mature “purer mind” (29), one sensitive to the “still, sad music of humanity” (91)—then he

---

<sup>39</sup> All citations from *The Prelude* are, unless otherwise noted, from the 1805 version as edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, in their parallel text edition.

attempts, within this analeptic gesture, also to turn his own present consciousness into the shape of the Dorothy's future. With this temporal overlapping, Wordsworth tries to galvanize his synthetic itinerary, one where no experience ought to be "unprofitable" (53), or where youthful error and "loss" must somehow yield "abundant recompense" (87, 88)—an economy discussed below in more detail, in the context of *The Prelude*, as attempting to profit from prophecy. In fact, the speaker manages both to 'recover' and to 'anticipate' something that is altogether outside empirical experience. On one hand, his memory goes beyond recalling details of the Abbey and his past self to include "feelings too/ Of unremembered pleasure" (30-31) and "little, nameless, unremembered, acts/ Of kindness and of love" (34-35). If we take him at his word, this seems to suggest that memory somehow remembers the unremembered, that nothing can be absolutely beyond all recall.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the alterity of this past—"I cannot paint/ What then I was" (75-76)—seems to become the motivating negativity, in a Hegelian sense, that catapults consciousness beyond the past and the present, and into a transcendent state conducive to participation in

[a] motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (100-102)

In fact, Wordsworth's tendency in "Tintern Abbey" to describe this unity in terms of music links the prophetic "picture of the mind" (61) to perhaps the most explicitly prophetic episode in *The Prelude*: the dream of the Arab.

That is, the speaker in "Tintern Abbey" frequently describes the "sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused" (96-96) in terms of musical harmony, suggesting that his synthetic operation is fundamentally temporal or is a way of gathering together not merely different static entities but different, dynamic forces into a mobile form of coherence. Indeed, if the "eye [is] made quiet by the power / Of harmony" (47-48), opening perception into "the life of things" (49), it is, similarly, the "still, sad *music*

---

<sup>40</sup> Glancing ahead, this is something Shelley's *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound*, discussed in chapter three, will complicate given that recalling forgetfulness as such might mean re-forgetting. In fact, this remembering of forgetfulness that results in the dismemberment (as it were) of memory might be a way to understand how a restricted economy of expenditure, as explained below in more detail, can turn itself into a general economy or how a relentlessly recuperative and synthetic exigency—like that of prophecy taken as prediction—can reach its limit when it aims to systematize that which is anti-systematic, resulting in (characteristically Romantic) fragmentation or ironic, detotalized, or non-predictive forms of prophecy.

of humanity” that spurs consciousness beyond “the mighty world/ Of eye, and ear” to the center of the speaker’s “moral being” (91, 105-106, 111). Harmony reappears in *The Prelude* as the form of the relationship between the finite and the transcendent when that relationship has been temporalized, that is, historically or allegorically distended. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Book Five Wordsworth relates an obscure, prophetic dream, one that comes on the heels of an acute sadness played in the same key as in “Tintern Abbey.” The speaker’s pain has a specific root: “it grieves me for thy state, O man,” but, he says, “not for woes” so much as for the honest labour of “study and hard thought/ The honours of thy endowments,” since these noble and worthwhile efforts will ultimately be superfluous as “the immortal being/ No more shall need such garments” (5.3, 5, 8-9, 23). The contradiction between human frailty—

[o]h, why hath not the mind

Some element to stamp her image on

In nature somewhat nearer to her own[?] (5.42-46)—

and the “highest reason in a soul sublime” (5.40) recalls the tension in the *Essays upon Epitaphs*. But where Wordsworth’s *Essay* turns to the funeral monument in an effort to mediate between the immortal soul and the mortal body, Book Five of the *Prelude* turns to books and poetry. Specifically, the ‘book of poetry,’ condensed (in the Freudian sense) into the shape of a shell, gathers together time and history in an orchestral crescendo:

“at the word,

The stranger,” said my friend continuing,

“Stretched forth the shell towards me, with command

That I should hold it to my ear. I did so

And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,

Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,

A loud prophetic blast of harmony,

An ode in passion uttered, which foretold

Destruction to the children of the earth

By deluge now at hand.” (5.90-99)

Echoing both the Deluge in Genesis and John’s apocalyptic vision, this scene presents prophecy as a prelude to apocalypse. And as in “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth here

figures harmony as the form with which to weave together an imminent future with the present, death with the “deluge now at hand.”

There is a sense, in fact, that Wordsworth seeks to model his temporality on a kind of mathematical logic that would serve as a universal substrate, something that could be “the anchor of [his] purest thoughts” (“Tintern” 109). For the shell is the second of two books described in this vision, the first a stone representing Classical geometry:

The Arab told him [i.e., the dreamer] that the stone—

To give it in the language of the dream—

Was *Euclid's Elements*. (5.86-88).

Given its placement in Wordsworth's book of Books, this book of Elements—an early text on geometrical sciences—might raise questions about the elements *of* books. This episode could serve, in other words, as an invitation to look more closely at poetry, the ‘elements’ of figurative language, or to consider what units and relationships form and organize the literary text. And yet, there is something ironic in this invitation. After all, it seems as if the dreamworld encountered in this vision precisely does *not* adhere to the kinds of laws sketched in Euclid's treatise. For, in direct violation of Aristotle's law of non-contradiction—a law implicit in Euclid's rigorously analytic system—it seems possible for one thing to be itself and something else at the same time<sup>41</sup>:

Strange as it may seem

I wondered not, although I plainly saw

The one to be a stone, th' other a shell,

Nor doubted once but that they both were books,

Having perfect faith in all that passed. (5.110-114)

So, with this invitation to consider the elements of books, we seem instantly to move beyond the purview of mathematical relation: the epistemology represented by Euclid's

---

<sup>41</sup> Strictly speaking, Aristotle's law, most explicitly and thoroughly discussed in *Metaphysics* Book IV, chapter 3, states that “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect” and that “if a man were mistaken on this point he would have contrary opinions at the same time” (736, 737). While Wordsworth's description of the dual status of the books in the dream does not quite violate the law in the precise terms of its formulation by Aristotle, it is still in essence a violation since Wordsworth's ‘books’ do not merely acquire additional attributes but undergo a change in their being—they are two entirely different *things* at the same time rather than being one thing with and without the same attribute. And being, to be clear, cannot be an attribute since its addition or subtraction alters the nature of the subject essentially.

*Elements* reaches the limit of its relevance when one poses the question of the elements of books, for the latter seem to violate Classical physical and metaphysical laws. The shell's fractal geometry, then, would have to manage poetry's unruly elements.<sup>42</sup> Hence, the harmony's temporalization of a mathematical relationship between musical elements represents something like poetry's attempt to self-organize and to import Euclidian truth to history and art—an idea Wordsworth will return to in Book Six when “the elements/ Of geometric science” inspire in him “a still sense/ Of permanent and universal sway” named, simply, “God” (6.136-137, 151-152, 157). If initially poetry threatens to breach the limits of conceptual order or to collapse axioms that must, as axioms, represent “truths [that] hold good for everything that is and not for some special genius apart from others” (Aristotle 736), the “blast of harmony” from Wordsworth's apocalyptic imagination animates Euclid's static, geometrical coherence by introducing the temporal completion of history in eschatology, suturing the logical gaps made by poetry through a higher order synthesis.

Later in Book Five, Wordsworth compares the Arab in this dream to a poet and, ultimately, to himself. The implication is that verse might aspire to a similarly complete vision—that it might achieve apocalypse in the sense of unveiling timeless truths. Hence, Wordsworth will aim to emulate the prophet—will literally follow in his footsteps—in an effort to join elite cultural company:

In sober contemplation of the approach  
Of such great overthrow, made manifest  
By certain evidence, that I methinks  
Could share that maniac's anxiousness,<sup>43</sup> could go  
Upon like errand. Oftentimes at least

<sup>42</sup> While the shell is not described in precise detail, the spiral-shaped sea-snail shell is most commonly the kind of shell one places one's ear to—as opposed, for instance, to bivalves.

<sup>43</sup> This is not the first time poetry and prophecy will be described in terms of insanity. Earlier in *The Prelude* Wordsworth associates prophecy and poetry with madness even as it is supposed to look through the chaos of the world of contingent appearances and into the deep truth:

If prophesy be madness; if things viewed  
By poets of old time, and higher up  
By the first men, earth's first inhabitants,  
May in these tutored days no more be seen  
With undistorted sight. (3.151-155)

His subsequent assurance that “it was no madness” (3.156) thus seems to be difficult fully to trust, hinting at the negative side of prophecy illustrated more forcefully by Shelley and Blake.

Me hath such deep entrancement half-possessed  
 When I have held a volume in my hand—  
 Poor earthly casket of immortal verse—  
 Shakespeare or Milton, labourers divine. (5.157-165)

Later, in Book Ten, Wordsworth again associates himself and his poetic vocation with prophetic speech, taking the latter in a variety of respects—including denunciation and warning—but ultimately as a form of totalization:

But as the ancient prophets were enflamed,  
 Nor wanted consolations of their own  
 And majesty of mind, when they denounced  
 On towns and cities, wallowing in the abyss  
 Of their offences, punishment to come;  
 Or saw like other men with bodily eyes  
 Before them in some desolated place  
 The consummation of the wrath of Heaven;  
 So did some portion of that spirit fall  
 On me to uphold me through those evil times,  
 And in their rage and dog-day heat I found  
 Something to glory in, as just and fit,  
 And in the order of sublimest laws. (10.401-413)

As in the dream of the Arab, Wordsworth here imagines that prophetic vision discloses “sublimest laws” through the “consummation of the wrath of Heaven,” almost turning the empirically visible violence of the French Revolution—the topic of Book Ten—into a kind of Kantian Sign of History. Indeed, the French Revolution forms an important context for this disclosure: the supplementary order imported by prophecy arrives precisely when mundane law and order has been overturned by political revolt. Specifically, this stabilizing, transcendent law counters the “Change and subversion” (10.233) that “might be named/ A revolution” (10.236-237) in Wordsworth’s *mind* by reinscribing revolution-as-revolt within the itinerary of revolution-as-natural-recycling.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Hartman’s comparison of two important, apocalyptic moments in the *Prelude*—the missed experience of crossing the Alps in Book Six and the ascent of Mount Snowdon in Book Fourteen—squares



Indeed, Wordsworth's mixed feelings upon witnessing the crimes committed in Liberty's name<sup>45</sup> suspend his active participation in revolt. In fact, a form of incessant rethinking counters or recontains even his psychic revolutions: when he describes how "Inly [he] revolved" (10.136), Wordsworth's choice of words carefully excises any sense of political upheaval and retains only the older sense of revolution as rotation. Within the chaos of radical upheaval, Wordsworth's prophecy again emerges as a form of control, one that aims to weave historical and psychological discord together through the dynamic logic of harmony, a kind of sensual dialectic that both cancels and preserves differences: "Wild blasts of music thus did find their way/ Into the midst of terrible events" (10.419-420). By performing this sublimation, "poets, even as prophets" become responsible for disclosing a rhythmic, harmonious, and organizing temporality demonstrative of how, despite political or psychological chaos—in fact, in the very withdrawal from the social into a private apocalypse spurred by such chaos—subjects and perhaps even history itself remain abstractly "Connected in a mighty scheme of truth" (12.301, 302).

---

with the argument here in that, for Hartman, Wordsworth's "tendency [is] to avoid an apocalyptic self-consciousness" (*Wordsworth's* 63). "Wordsworth does not sustain the encounter with Imagination" but rather attempts to invest that imminent apocalypse back into nature, where the latter is understood as "a motion and a spirit" (41, 42). And yet, if Nature is, at the same time, "a guide leading beyond itself"—if Wordsworth mediates transcendence through nature, generating a kind of "*via naturaliter negative*"—this suggests a rhythm of breach, followed by containment, followed by a breach of that containment (42, 31). As Hartman illustrates through a comparison of biographical and compositional histories, then comparing those orderings with the structural ordering of events in the text itself, it is not clear that consciousness finally achieves any ultimate illumination in the form of absolute reflection. As Hartman notes:

The poet is suddenly renewed from an unexpected and casual source. The Simplon Pass and Snowdon bring a twofold revelation that could have been sevenfold in John the Divine. But they differ from traditional apocalypses by being purely natural and by not inevitably associating rebirth and violent purgation. The Book of Revelation that is Nature sees life dying into eternal life with or without those apocalyptic labours. (67)

In fact, if the apocalyptic vision following the Simplon Pass represents the episode in which Wordsworth "came once, and only once, face to face with his imagination" (61), it is important to recognize, in the context of prophecy's relation to restricted and general economies, that even this moment of ostensible non-restriction, a moment when nature does not mediate the poet's mind but where the mind becomes *absolute*, is still a form of restricted economy. While the direct confrontation with the imagination explodes Nature's containment, apocalypse *as such* is another level or kind of containment that might, in turn, be displaced by a certain concept of prophecy as temporal detotalization. Just as the Kantian sublime turns imagination's difficulty with presenting ideas into a sign of Reason, therein exalting the mind through this negative theology, so does Wordsworth turn the acute disconnection between expectation and experience into "food" that sustains a grander sense the self as auto-productive.

<sup>45</sup> The illustrious wife of Roland, in the hour  
Of her composure, felt that agony  
And gave it vent in her last words. (10.352-354)

As the editors' note to these lines from earlier in Book Ten explains, "Madame Roland was a major influence behind the moderate Girondins. She was imprisoned in June 1793, and guillotined on November 9. Her last words are said to have been 'Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!'" (378 n1).

In the midst of his thinking about the French Revolution's potential for social and political liberation, Wordsworth echoes Moses' democratizing wish that "all the LORD's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29):

Yea, I could almost  
 Have prayed that throughout the earth upon all souls  
 Worthy of liberty, upon every soul  
 Matured to live in plainness and in truth,  
 The gift of tongues might fall, and men arrive  
 From the four quarters of the winds to do  
 For France what without help she could not do. (10.117-123)<sup>46</sup>

The speaker's language, however, denies his ostensible desire by erecting barriers to this universalization of enlightenment. For the speaker reserves this enlightenment for only those souls "matured to live in plainness and in truth," that is, souls that are in essence already enlightened. Moreover, the rhetorical framework, "I could *almost* have prayed," suggests that the speaker did not in fact pray for universal illumination: the grammatical formulation of the passage as a wish contains a latent rhetorical negation of that same wish. Such restriction seems inevitable given Wordsworth's persistent claim to special election. Indeed, early in *The Prelude* Wordsworth makes clear that not just anyone can be a poet, that, like the prophet, a higher power chooses this vocation on the subject's behalf:

To the open fields I told  
 A prophesy; poetic numbers came  
 Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe  
 My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,  
 For holy services. (1.59-63)

There is a sense, then, that Wordsworth believes himself to be "gifted." In fact, later he describes "the mind" as "gifted with such powers to send abroad/ Her spirit" (5.44, 47-48), using the term, there, to describe a form of generosity. Yet, what are the implications

---

<sup>46</sup> The editors' note to this passage suggests an allusion to Acts 2:3-4. While that is perfectly reasonable, it seems that it might also gesture toward Numbers, especially given the context, in the Old Testament, of state founding and formation.

of this word's (i.e., "gifted") manifold connotations? If poets and prophets, as the 1850 *Prelude* has it,

[h]ave each his own peculiar faculty,  
 Heaven's gift, a sense that fits him to perceive  
 Objects unseen before (13.303-305),

what is the relationship between the sense of a gift as something offered freely and this sense of giftedness as a power belonging to a subject and, especially in Wordsworth's case, greedily withheld from others? What are the consequences for thinking about prophecy if the concept of the gift involves the conflation of these two diametrically opposed gestures? And finally, how does this privatization of prophecy—Wordsworth's effort to turn prophecy into a *property* of the elected subject—undermine its social and political force and effectivity? Closer inquiry reveals a faultline here in Wordsworth's synthetic, totalizing mode of prophecy, something that lies beneath the complications encountered, below, with the spots of time, where their restorative economy reveals a retraumatizing potential.

## II. "Rare and almost threatening gift": Prophetic Epistemologies

What exactly does it mean to call the Romantic prophet "gifted"? The word "gifted" has to be read, here, in Wordsworth's double sense, as both describing a particular ability or skill as well as signifying generosity or prodigality—the prophet gives to his or her people a narrative that warns, threatens, and promises...something. The prophet's generosity, however, is particularly complicated, and stages the curious paradox of gift giving. *Given Time*, Jacques Derrida's extended treatment of Marcel Mauss' anthropological studies of potlatch, proposes to "begin by the impossible" (1)—namely, by the gift. The difficulty in starting with the gift is that the gift itself presents an apparent aporia: "if the gift appears or signifies itself, if it exists or if it is presently *as gift*, as what it is, then it is not, it annuls itself" (*Given* 27). That is, when the gift is recognized as a gift, it is immediately taken up in an economy of exchange. Any such exchange of gifts, however, levels down the event of the gift through a formula of equalization. Put otherwise, exchange—as an essential component of the notion of

economy as such—when applied to gifts, annihilates the pure giving of the gift by placing it in terms that make returnability possible. Such returnability—indicating, as Marx has made clear, a structural equivalency—is, further, easily and almost seamlessly appropriated by ulterior motives, transferring this potentiality into an implicit demand for equilibrium and the insistence on some sort of compensation. Due to this nature of economy and exchange, the gift is thus figured, for the receiver, as a debt. In order to prevent the gift's appropriation as debt through economization, sublimating the singularity of an event that would actually *breach* the structure of economy itself, and to try, instead, to think about the gift as such, Derrida turns to strategies involving dissimulation, secrecy, and forgetfulness, invoking an ironic phenomenology. The gift, apparently, must be disguised—must appear, but not as what it is—in order to be what it is. But Derrida goes further than this, arguing that the essence of the gift is entangled in a paradox that displaces essence (understood as a static *quiditas* or “whatness”): “the truth of the gift,” he says, “is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non-truth of the gift” (*Given* 27). Only through this aporetic procedure can the gift, for Derrida, be approached—which is to say that the gift, like the auratic original work of art Walter Benjamin describes, must remain “at a distance, however close it may be” (*Illuminations* 222).

Only by *giving nothing* can generosity ‘appear.’ With this in mind, we might reconsider the concept of false prophecy as it emerges in a rather curious episode in the Old Testament’s Book of Jonah. Part of the problem for Jonah is that God cancels the prophecy of Nin’evah’s destruction after having the prophet announce this event. With a narrative efficiency characteristic of the Old Testament, the prophecy, the peoples’ repentance, and God’s reconsideration all take place within just a few lines:

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he cried, “Yet forty days, and Nin’evah shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nin’evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. Then tidings reached the king of Nin’evah, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation and published through Nin’evah, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed,

or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:4-10)

God's change of heart, however, has rather serious consequences for Jonah's credibility given the definition of false prophecy offered earlier, in Deuteronomy: "And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?'—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him" (18:21-22). Jonah's *success*—the people of Nin'evah do change and forestall the anticipated catastrophe—makes him appear to be a *false* prophet. Jonah's story suggests that a successful prophet is, strangely, indistinguishable from false prophet, since nothing that is threatened materializes if the warning is, as warning, successful.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the social or effective force of the language (the effect of the prophecy-as-threat) seems to run counter to the content of the language (prophecy-as-promise), suggesting a kind of schizophrenic or internally, and literally, *preposterous* speech. Prophecy, here, involves not an anticipation of the future in the present but a conflict, where language's content contradicts the immediate force or effectivity of the same utterance, thus splitting the utterance into a kind of dialogue, though one not in echoing harmony, as in Blanchot's description, but rather suspended in its own *differend*.

If a successful prophet looks like, or appears as, a false prophet, we might have to reevaluate the relationships between prophetic speech, time, and historiography—that is, the science of history, which, given its tendency, as Heidegger notes, to thematize its object of inquiry, imposes a certain horizontal limitation on history's appearance. If, for

<sup>47</sup> Northrop Frye seems to emphasize only one side of this doubled speech, considering prophecy's effectiveness as a warning tantamount to perfectly successful prophecy: "perhaps some prophet of the age, whether Blake or another matters little, may achieve the final triumph of the prophet, a triumph accorded in the Bible only to Jonah, who did not appreciate it, of finding his prophecy of impending disaster fail because it is being listened to" (403).

instance, the prophetic utterance is valid in some respects only in its non-effect—in its *promissory* form—then what is the truth of prophecy, or what constitutes a felicitous prophecy? Again, the prophecy's effectiveness as a threat has an inverse relationship with its own status as a promise; if it is successful in one of these registers, it must be unsuccessful in the other. For example, if prophetic truth is taken as the adequation between what is announced and the realization of the events described, prophecy as a successful threat will always amount to false prophecy since its success would mean forestalling whatever it anticipates. On the other hand, prophecy that fails as a threat may be considered true—or at least, in the indefinite lead up to its prediction, not yet false. Yet, this paradox illustrates how the non-event of a false prophecy is in some ways more radically generous: for the effectiveness of the threat, the change that the threat solicits, forestalls apocalypse, giving the community a future even if to all appearances nothing has been given at all.<sup>48</sup>

The salient point here is that the internally divided nature of the prophetic utterance suggests that establishing who is a true and who a false prophet—a matter immediately relevant to Wordsworth's self-fashioning—may be irreducibly complex, perhaps even impossible. This is not merely because the event promised might remain hovering in the to-come but also because the very concept of prophecy's truth is radically elusive: if it is effective as a threat—"rare and almost threatening gift" (Blanchot *Book* 85)—the truth of this generosity is invisible. For, the threat gives not just the future but time to the community: time understood as the possibility of mobility, change, and responsiveness or as an opportunity to revise the *status quo* in a gesture that, in fact, outstrips prediction. Time here conditions liberation or what Ernst Bloch, discussed further in chapter five, calls "exodus," as it dissolves the habits and sedimentations that make daily life, even when intolerable, seem to be natural and inevitable. Hence, if we take the "truth of history" as merely that which appears or is available to historical narrative, we seem to miss perhaps not the objects in history but certainly history's temporality and potentiality. That is, any transcendental concept of the truth of history seems ill-suited to the matter, in that the gift of time is neither prescriptive nor objectively

---

<sup>48</sup> As discussed in chapter five, Mary Shelley uses the division between the narrative and the narrative frame in *The Last Man* to redeploy this difference between threat and promise across a fictional history, thus opening up a new concept of the future even in the ostensible annihilation of humanity.

present, but rather a kind of opening or opportunity. This problem of the gift of time in prophecy will reemerge in chapter five, as Mary Shelley and Caroline Lamb both consider the prophetic curse and the meaning of true and false prophecy in a context that highlights the juridical logic of historiography.<sup>49</sup>

The problem of the prophet's 'gift'—where this gift is taken as a kind of generosity that can emerge, as it were, only under radical erasure—contaminates both Wordsworth's poetry and, as discussed further in chapter four, William Blake's texts. It becomes for both a problem of narrative temporalization. The prophet inaugurates an historical sequence by articulating a contract with the future. But, because what a prophet announces is, from the perspective of the present, impossible or unimaginable in actuality, the effect is to unsettle the point of inauguration itself in the very instant of its determination. Hence, this contracted future equally resists such containment. Like death in Blanchot's critique of Heidegger, it is a future that simply cannot be related to with any assurance despite its inevitability.<sup>50</sup> For, as Blanchot suggests, "to foresee and announce some future event does not amount to much if this future takes place in the ordinary course of events and finds its expression in the regularity of language. But prophetic speech announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence" (*Book 79*). Rather than providing foreknowledge, Blanchot argues, "when speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence" (*Book 79*).

In other words, prophecy is not simply predictive but a speech that attempts to undermine an actual state of affairs by placing present and future into a mutually exclusive relationship, where the burden of this difference does not so much undermine the supposed future as cancel or de-realize the present. The effect is to displace presence as such, through an abrupt repudiation of the present. There is a sense, then, that what is offered as a starting point for history is, perhaps, always self-conflicted or improper, in

---

<sup>49</sup> See also Mark Cousins' "The Practice of Historical Investigation" in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*.

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps one could even say that the inevitability of death is what ensures that the future can be *known as* unpredictable. In a strange way, if death was not inevitable it would not be possible to determine it as unpredictable since then it may *never* occur, thus setting it outside the very logic of predictability.

the sense of being unable perfectly to appropriate itself. This means that the prophetic gift, when understood as a retraction of the present or actual, demonstrates a symptomatic return to points of origin in an attempt to square the experience of the future with the past—a past that that same future reveals as initially misunderstood or misapprehended. Hence, narrative coherence will always attempt to economize the “rare and almost threatening gift” of prophecy and the ambiguous temporality it opens. Narrative—essentially temporal and yet resistant to temporality’s detotalizing force—attempts nevertheless to mourn time. And yet, such a project is as ironic as it is interminable, since time itself only emerges *as* a traumatic event or as something missed—or, in the terms of chapter three, *dismembered*. For time’s corrosiveness is violent and yet never present—is always something we ‘return’ to through the memory *of* forgetfulness or what Blanchot calls “forgetful memory” (*Infinite* 314).

One can situate the problem of prophetic inauguration formally by focusing on texts that claim to be anticipatory, such as preludes and prefaces. Indeed, if apocalypse is concerned with the *end* of history, prophecy is, perhaps, concerned with how history—as figure, narrative, genre, or experience—eludes totalization, how history opens to novelty, and how one gains a sense for time through history, even if that means sensing time indirectly in the rhythm of its arrests. However, inaugurating para-texts, like prophets, do not simply begin works but attempt to *anticipate* the disruptive, alienating gift of the future by writing the beginning in light of that future. The preface attempts properly to locate a beginning by placing itself in a time before the beginning, such that *beginning* can be understood as something yet to come. However, if with this gesture a preface tries to give the beginning, it can do so only through intense self-negation recalling the prophet’s mutilation, his or her disfiguration and defacement. In fact, this negation seems to open another, in fact an absolute, gap between origin and goal, beginning and future, given that there is a kind of infinite regress implied by such negativity. For when or how, one could ask, does a prelude *itself* begin? Can there be—or must there be—a prelude to a prelude, a preface to a preface that would dig ever deeper into absence in a desperate attempt to stage the beginning as something continuous with the future?

For Blanchot, such an abyss does indeed haunt literary beginnings and he gestures toward this when he articulates the paradox that a writer “has no talent until he has



written, but he needs talent in order to write" (*Fire* 303).<sup>51</sup> Such existential writer's block (if you will) cannot be mitigated except by fiat or prefatory extemporaneity, as the musical connotations of the word *prelude* suggest<sup>52</sup>—a usage consonant with Wordsworth's "grosser prelude" (2.433) designating an external stimulus in distinction from the "one life" that is "invisible, yet liveth to the heart" (*Prelude* 2.430, 424). Hence, Blanchot: "let us suppose that the work has been written" (*Fire* 305). Such a beginning, however, seems to be irreducibly abrupt. In other words, the beginning is unprecedented and inescapably unexpected. This sense of a prelude as mere positing<sup>53</sup> seems to conflict with the other sense of prelude as an anticipation of beginning: a "prelude" would be both what is without precedent and that which serves as precedent, such that defining the word one way or the other inevitably solicits its uncanny other. Like prophecy itself, the prelude is both the ecstatic fiat that welcomes time's corrosive negativity and the defensive attempt to discipline that same negativity by presenting it as its perfect opposite: a plan of all that will follow. This duplicity is responsible for the conflation of the gift of prophecy with its own uncanny other, namely, trauma. The gift of prophecy makes the beginning into something inevitably traumatic because prophecy announces a future that must break with the beginning absolutely.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Count Reinhard, commenting to Goethe concerning the Spanish revolution in 1820, says something similar: "[Experience] arrives for individuals always too late, while for governments and peoples it is never available. This is because past experience presents itself concentrated in a single focus, while that which has yet to be experienced is spread over minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; thus similitude never appears to be the same, for in the one case one sees the whole, and in the latter only individual parts" (quoted in Koselleck 34). Again, there is this problem of precedence, where experience always seems to be belated and unavailable right up until the point that it is outmoded—that is, it finally arrives as (already) outmoded.

<sup>52</sup> "Prelude: 3. *Music*. Originally: a short, often extemporized, piece of music played before another in order to tune an instrument or allow an instrumentalist to warm up (*obs.*). Now: (a) a piece designed as the formal introduction to a musical work, *esp.* a movement preceding a fugue or forming the first piece of a suite" (OED).

<sup>53</sup> This double aspect of the prophetic utterance anticipates the discussion in chapter three of Paul de Man's concept of figural reading. For de Man, all texts become allegories of their own radically deconstructive self-displacement, a displacement immanent to all works in that a text's performative dimension as pure positing always undermines and is in turn undermined by the rhetorical or meaningful dimension, one based not on positing but on the circulation or economy of tropes. As Gasché explains, in terms pertinent to the description of prophecy as a form of positing (*setzen*) and a form of translation (*übersetzen*) or mediation between the Divine and the human, any critical reading that would seek to translate the text into critical insight can do so only by simultaneously repressing the act of positing in that work, suggesting that critical insight, like prophetic insight, is coincident with a certain kind of blindness, or that all texts suffer from a version of the discontinuity within prophetic phenomenology.

<sup>54</sup> In chapter four, section II, I return to this problem at length in the context of Blake.

There is, consequently, something both palliative and hostile about the prophetic utterance. On one hand, prophecy, as prediction or as a preface in the sense of something that prepares for the beginning, attempts to remove any discontinuity in history (and between history and experience) through a contractual pattern that economizes the new by rendering it, in effect, always already old. On the other hand, prophecy as an impossible speech, as a radical positing for which no preface can prepare history (this is where the preface emerges under its second aspect, as a perpetual retreat into absence) creates a rupture in time or opens the rupture *of* time—a cut or “crisis” in Koselleck’s sense, as thought and life’s relation to the future has become intensely problematic. Blanchot hints at prophecy’s violent prodigality when he concludes that

[w]e owe much, then, to the poet whose poetry, translated by the prophets, knew how to transmit the essential to us: the primal eagerness, this haste, this refusal to be delayed and attached. Rare and almost threatening gift, for he must above all make perceptible, in all *true* speech, by the devotion to rhythm and primitive accent, that speech always spoken and never heard that doubles it with pre-echo, rumour of wind and impatient murmur destined to repeat in advance, at the risk of destroying it by preceding it.  
(*Book 85*)

If the “essential” here, in a deconstructive idiom, has something to do with radical difference rather than totality—the ability of language to break from its immediate, swaddling context and to be repeated or to be cited in the future—the poetry of prophecy seems to give voice to such “primal eagerness” or “haste” of an inauguration that must always be a kind of depression in or loss of full self-presence. If this ability to articulate origination is a “rare and almost threatening gift,” it is because the Nothing that the gift gives is really indistinguishable from retracting assurances and suspending narrative continuity altogether. When the concept of the future that is given is itself the product of a post-Revolution worldview, when the future is understood, for the first time, as radically *unprecedented*, such a ‘giving’ does indeed meet the strange criteria of Derrida’s gift, in that what is ‘given’ is uncertain(ly).

### III. Self-Fulfilling Trauma

Let us suppose that *The Prelude* has been written. In the first effort at his epic proper, Book One of *The Recluse*, “Home at Grasmere,” Wordsworth invokes the tradition of prophetic inspiration. At this point, however, such an appeal seems strangely belated. Has he not already begun and has he not already called on his muse—that “voice/ That flowed along” (1.6-7 [1799]) his childhood dreams—the river Derwent? Why this redundancy of invocation? In fact, the entire passage hovers in limbo between assertion and wish, poetic self-confidence and an “anxiety of hope” (11.371)—that is, somewhere between the poetic subject’s assertion of pre-determined, almost Calvinist election, as noted earlier, and his restless appeal to uncertain redemption:

Come, thou prophetic Spirit, that inspirest  
 The human Soul of universal earth,  
 Dreaming on things to come; and dost possess  
 A metropolitan temple in the hearts  
 Of mighty Poets; upon me bestow  
 A gift of genuine insight; that my Song  
 With star-like virtue in its place may shine,  
 Shedding benignant influence, and secure  
 Itself from all malevolent effect  
 Of those mutations that extend their sway  
 Throughout the nether sphere! And if with this  
 I mix more lowly matter—with the thing  
 Contemplated describe the Mind and Man  
 Contemplating, and who and what he was,  
 The transitory Being that beheld  
 This Vision, when and where, and how he lived—  
 Be not this labour useless. (836-852)<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> These lines (and all subsequent citations of “Home at Grasmere,” unless otherwise indicated) are taken from Manuscript D as reproduced in Beth Darlington’s parallel text edition of “Home at Grasmere,” Cornell UP, 1977. The only significant variation from his later version of the poem—i.e., that reproduced in the posthumous 1888 *Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*—with respect to the passage

While the speaker asserts his availability for inspiration, he nevertheless must solicit the prophetic Spirit's arrival. This raises a question concerning poetic invocation as such: that is, if inspiration must be solicited, is the act of solicitation itself able to claim to be inspired? Such a call *to* prophecy would seem, rather, to preface inspiration and as such to be, itself, necessarily *uninspired* and therefore unsupported and unstable. Indeed, the ambiguity concerning the usefulness of this poetic labour, in the final line of the passage above cited, is supposed to be clarified by the "gift of genuine insight." Yet, given that such assurances issue from a speech devoid of inspiration or predictive authority, any confidence in this clarification to come seems misplaced. As this misplaced confidence suggests, however, the invocation *already* performs the mixing it, ostensibly, *preemptively* apologizes for. The disconnection between the "lowly matter" of "the Mind of Man" and the "Vision" that this "transitory Being" is privileged to behold is something already dissolved in the very moment that the difference is asserted. In a neatly camouflaged rhetorical maneuver, the echo between the object "contemplated" and the mind actively "contemplating"—the inspiring Spirit and the lowly speaker, respectively—seems to mix up subject and object. The speaker's mind is cast, grammatically, as the active force while the inspiring Vision appears to be relatively static. Like the boy of Winander, it is as if the echo of his own voice here returns to and touches the speaker as something strange. His *appeal* to the "prophetic Spirit" returns to *fulfill* that same request, carrying far into "the human Soul of universal earth" the gentle shock, the "gift of genuine insight." An "acoustical illusion" (*Fragments* 53), indeed.<sup>56</sup>

---

quoted, is that here Wordsworth's invocation opens with "*come* thou prophetic Spirit" whereas later versions begin "*descend* thou prophetic Spirit." The earlier, Manuscript D version—dating likely somewhere between 1812 and 1814 (Darlington 25)—has the virtue of echoing the apocalyptic language characteristic of the Book of Revelations, again suggesting that Wordsworth sees himself in some respects akin to the biblical prophets.

<sup>56</sup> In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard describes the understanding's claim to have originated the unthought—its absolutely Other—and thereby to have comprehended the paradox as an "acoustical illusion":

[W]hen the understanding cannot get the paradox into its head, this did not have its origin in the understanding but in the paradox itself, which was paradoxical enough to have the effrontery to call the understanding a clod and a dunce who at best can say "yes" and "no" to the same thing, which is not good theology. So it is with offence. Everything it says about the paradox it has learned from the paradox, even though, making use of an acoustical illusion, it insists that it itself has originated the paradox. (53)

It is this illusion that would confuse the unthinkable with the thinkable, or would try to suggest that the unthought could somehow have emerged out of thought. In his own way, Wordsworth invites thought's Other into consciousness, as the prophetic call to prophecy echoes back to the speaker a subjective depth—

This self-fulfilling prophecy of prophetic inspiration suggests that it is difficult in Wordsworth to separate assertion from solicitation, fact from desire.<sup>57</sup> In fact, it is this confusion that may prove to be most interesting. For, as Blanchot suggests in slightly different terms, “literature encounters its most dangerous meaning—that of interrogating itself in a declarative mode—at times triumphantly, and in so doing discovering that everything belongs to it, at other times, in distress, discovering it is lacking everything since it only affirms *itself* by default” (*Infinite* 355). Like literature’s unsettlingly declarative interrogatives, prophecy’s assertive solicitation of inspiration oscillates between self-confidence and self-doubt. Indeed, in the case of prophecy, this grammatical and emotional confusion involves another, temporal confusion as it becomes difficult to part past and present from the future. In Wordsworth’s echo logic, as it were, the arrival of the future seems indistinguishable from a return of the past. And this ambiguity structures those other, well-known moments of inspiration, the spots of time. The insistence on negativity in these moments of supposed “future restoration” illustrates not only the double gesture of the ecstatic gift but also a more depressing double gesture, where an affirmative orientation to the future cannot be separated from a regressive, traumatic itinerary. If Romantic prophecy is a gift that gives nothing objective—if the prophet ‘embodies’ this absence as his or her giftedness, the generosity of a temporality both offered and hidden by the antinomic nature of prophecy as promise and threat—then it is no surprise that in the same instance as the future is proffered, it is revoked by trauma: the arrival of the future is confused with its uncanny double, the return of the absolute past. To be clear: this is not to say that Wordsworth is a failed prophet, *per se*, but rather that Romantic prophecy is necessarily an involuted or disfigured mode of

---

that is, creates in the speaker the very depth and power that is ostensibly discovered, as if latent, in the subject.

<sup>57</sup> This position of the prophet, unsettled in his or her being by a desire that solicits another state of existence, is described well by Thomas Weiskel in the parallel but different context of the psychology of the sublime:

But what is identity under the aspect of desire? It is an image of the self, a fictional “me” which exhibits alternately two states corresponding to the myth of continuity and the myth of loss. The first is a coincidence of the “me” and the ideal, a kind of epiphany of narcissism in which the ideal is already felt as a “self-presence” in the mind. But the absence-phase of desire underlies this fiction and can only be suspended momentarily by it. Identity contains an acknowledgement not this time of loss, but of frustration. (154)

Wordsworth’s prophetic call to prophecy reflects something like the dominance of this psychological condition, the sense of the self as perpetually frustrated by its own ideals.

representing history, reflective of the unprecedented temporalization of history and the epistemic break coincident with this new kind of time. As such, the opaque surface of the future resembles a painful, originary beginning by fiat.

Throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's goal—in a rather Hegelian formulation—is the origin, where this origin figures variously as the home, nature, the mother and father, the original self, and the original impressions experienced by that self: “How shall I trace the history, where seek/ The origin of what I then have felt?” (1.365-6). In the wake of increasing industrialization and the subject's subsequent instrumentalization, Wordsworth would telescope the past through the present and suture the increasingly incoherent self together across time and space. But if the spots of time serve as so many quilting points for the subject—original impressions that transcend and organize history—such origins are complicated since their restorative power cannot be distinguished from their damaging, traumatic violence. The same intensity that causes these moments to stand out of time—they are as much *stops* as *spots* in time, or moments that break time's linearity—seems also to scar the psyche. Thus the desire to return to the past overlaps with an anxiety that with this return, violence might be repeated, such that, for the speaker, “the fear gone by/ Pressed on [him] almost like a fear to come” (10.62-3). The spots of time, these original impressions that transport the speaker back to various points in childhood and draw his life together, are at the same time indistinguishable from traumatic impressions, events that alienate the subject from himself. This kind of origin, what Benjamin might call “an eddy in the stream of becoming” (*Trauerspiel* 45), has both a centripetal and centrifugal effect on the subject, marking the beginning of time and development's possibility but also marking time itself, thereby stalling the promised futurity, the “future restoration,” such moments represent.

This temporal overlapping and the attendant affective disjunction, itself structurally analogous to the prophetic call *to* prophecy, is couched in particularly gothic terms when the ostensibly inspired speaker of “Home at Grasmere” describes his ultimate project, namely, an epic on the sublimity of the human mind:

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink  
Deep, and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds  
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.

All strength, all terror, single or in bands,  
 That ever was put forth in personal form—  
 Jehovah, with his thunder, and the choir  
 Of shouting Angels and the empyreal thrones—  
 I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not  
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out  
 By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe  
 As fall upon us often when we look  
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,  
 My haunt and the main region of my song. (781-794)

At one level, this passage appears simply to take up the epic tradition of over-going the predecessor; just as Milton aspired to transcend Classical epic with his treatment of the Fall and redemption of humankind, so Wordsworth would pass Milton's "Jehovah" and "choir/ Of shouting Angels" coolly "unalarmed." There is, however, something troubling about this description of the mind. The speaker is on "shadowy ground" and has, ironically, to "sink/ Deep" to regard a sublime power. The mind is deeper and darker than might be expected from a speaker who "did [...] drink the visionary power" (2.331)—a darkness recalling Dante's *Inferno* and Aeneas' earlier *katabasis* in Virgil's epic. Indeed, Wordsworth falls, Hyperion-like, into the "deep/ Recesses in man's heart" (1.233) and finds himself amid "huge and mighty forms that do not live" (1.424). Such "Unnam'd forms" (*Milton* 15:18-19), as Blake might call them, refuse, however, passively to submit to reason, and move "slowly through" (1.425) the mature poet's mind just as they had the mind of the young boy following his theft of the "elfin pinnace" (1.401). In other words, if the mind is the speaker's "haunt" in the sense of "home" or a well-known space, it is also a *haunted* region. This double sense of the word "haunt" emerges forcefully in "Home at Grasmere." The speaker, in an attempt to establish his comfort beyond all shade of doubt, says

No where (or is it fancy?) can be found—  
 The one sensation that is here; 'tis here,  
 Here as it found its way into my heart

In childhood, here as it abides by day,

By night, here only. (136-140)

The repetition of “here” seems, rather ironically, to undermine the declaration of comfort. The speaker’s feverish, obsessive gesturing—“here...here”—sounds panicked, alarmed, and, indeed, alarming, recalling what David Collings calls Wordsworth’s “Masochistic Repetition” (69).<sup>58</sup> The passage is *too* insistent to prove convincing, its intensity unravelling its own semantic content—just as the prophetic *threat* can undermine itself as a *promise*.<sup>59</sup> Hence, in the very attempt to confirm homeliness, the speaker calls that assurance into question. As with the prophetic call to prophecy, assertion and wish blend together here, unsettling the stability of the origin in the very instant it is proffered, revoking the comfort of the home in the same instant it is given. Strange, almost threatening gift.

Nor is this the first time that anxiety will be confused with ease. In Book Four of *The Prelude*, the summer vacation strangely imposes itself upon the speaker:

[C]omfort seemed to touch

A heart that had not been disconsolate,

Strength came where weakness was not known to be,

At least not felt; and restoration came

Like an intruder knocking at the door

Of unacknowledged weariness. (4.143-8)

While in “Home at Grasmere,” insistent claims to homeliness contribute to an unhomey atmosphere, in Book Four of *The Prelude*, anxiety masquerades as restoration. Given the private/public dichotomy implied by the image of a knocking intruder, this masquerade suggests that the home is compromised—as in “Grasmere.” In a sense, when “restoration,” the true master of the home, returns to his dwelling, he finds it occupied by his enemy. If restoration is mistaken for the intruder then, in a terrifying reversal, those barricaded inside the house must suddenly realize that their host is a foe. Indeed, this reversal seems to suggest that the “restoration” Wordsworth will come to associate with the spots of time may be deeply ambivalent. For instance, Collings suggests that “Home

<sup>58</sup> See Collings’ discussion of this particular passage, pages 39 and 139 of *Wordsworthian Errancies*.

<sup>59</sup> This recalls Paul de Man’s gesture to the “strategy of denegation which calls a threat a shelter in the hope of thus laying it to rest” (*Rhetoric* 86).



at Grasmere” is infected by a somewhat unruly, inauspicious allusion to “Guilt and Sorrow”: the rhetorical “here...here” of “Home at Grasmere” recalls the tale of the “lonely Spital,” and how it became “named the ‘Dead House’ of the plain” (150, 153). As the speaker of “Guilt and Sorrow” relates, he

[h]ad heard of one who, forced from storms to shroud,  
 Felt the loose walls of this decayed Retreat  
 Rock to incessant neighings shrill and loud,  
 While his horse pawed the floor with furious heat;  
 Till on a stone, that sparkled to his feet,  
 Struck, and still struck again, the troubled horse:  
 The man half raised the stone with pain and sweat,  
 Half raised, for well his arm might lose its force  
 Disclosing the grim head of a late-murdered corse. (172-180)

Not only does the speaker seem to echo his own experience of being driven to the “Dead House” by storms, but, as Collings notices, the horse’s incessant pawing anticipates the behaviour of the speaker in “Home at Grasmere” and, I would add, the intruder in *The Prelude*: both figures point incessantly to the home and yet, in this very gesture, ex-pose the dwelling.

In short, the human mind and the childhood home, two places referred to by the speaker as the “haunt, and the main region of [his] song” in “Home at Grasmere,” are also haunted. This overlap illustrates the problem mentioned above, where attempts to return to an original impression or place in order to stabilize the self may actually involve a paradoxical self-alienation, as such a return—like Prometheus’ ambivalent attempt to “recall” his curse in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*—could prove to be re-traumatizing. In other words, Wordsworth’s effort to return to the missed experience—to place, specifically, the missed encounter of the gibbet-mast episode, as discussed in more detail below—into a larger temporality of subjective *Bildung*, may in fact fail to economize that non-experience. Despite the speaker’s confidence in reflection, certain peculiarly recalcitrant materials or episodes resist his synthesizing narrative. After all, as Collings suggests, Wordsworth is playing a dangerous game throughout *The Prelude*, as he attempts to metamorphose error into exception, errancy into a confidence that

should the guide [he] chuse  
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud  
 [He] cannot miss [his] way. (1.17-19)

As Collings suggests,

Many readers have argued, taking their cue from the first book of the 1805 *Prelude*, [that] in writing about his crisis Wordsworth gets his poem started and, in a sense, overcomes the crisis [...]. But he accomplishes much more than this; making deviance from his vocation into a sign of vocation, he envisions a mode of authorship which tolerates errancy and a privilege that can still mark a person who is subject to human waywardness. He need not attempt the impossible and become, like the pedlar, exempt from human suffering or, like his fictional Hartley, inseparable from nature. (123)

There is, indeed, a precarious strategy in Wordsworth that attempts to read failure as success, damage as inspiration. For instance, following his decision not to pursue a Cambridge fellowship, the speaker claims, punningly, to find recompense in “poetic fellowship” with a company of authors:

The dread awe  
 Of mighty names was softened down, and seemed  
 Approachable, admitting fellowship  
 Of modest sympathy. (6.72-5)

This marks a perverse tendency in Wordsworth, where the poet “suggests that he was elected as a poet, set apart not merely by the gods but by God himself, in a moment of masochistic wounding” (Collings 151). In other words, it is part of Wordsworth’s claim to prophetic inspiration: physical and psychological trauma is, as already discussed, a defining feature of the prophet. And again, this makes it difficult to separate a future orientation from the regressive, traumatic origin *of* that very visionary perspective. Hence, Collings’ description of Wordsworthian masochism serves as a reasonable description of prophetic inspiration precisely because the latter follows from psychic or even ontological violence, a radical penetration of the individual that is both damaging and yet, strangely, desired:

In this extraordinarily risky move, Wordsworth suggests that cultural dismemberment transfigures the world, that the dead who invade *Salisbury Plain* give him an uncanny, original power when they wound him.

Wordsworth's claims here are both outrageous and perverse; he at once celebrates cultural disaster and imagines a masochistic vocation. The world's descent into total violence made him a poet—a magus who receives his power when invaded by demons. (118)

Hence, Wordsworth's claims to poetic mastery are based on a dubious substitution of trauma (or blindness) for insight, or, again, a kind of Kierkegaardian “acoustical illusion” that claims its radical Other as its own and seeks to ‘embody’ paradox. If the poet returns to past traumas with the aim to narrate the missed experience, it appears that the power to generate that superior, recuperative narrative itself rests on the careful maintenance of a trauma that must *never* be exposed as such, for risk of abdicating the very inspiration necessary for writing. Prophetic power seems *predicated* on traumatic involution and to *retain* its inspired, motivating status only insofar as it wounds.

Modern trauma theory offers useful insights for the analysis of prophetic psychology since prophecy offers a cognitive profile based on precisely the kind of missed experience that sets the phenomenon of trauma in motion. For the prophet is not merely violated, but is, for an interval, dispossessed of his or her identity. The prophet's consciousness, specifically, registers a temporal interruption and struggles subsequently to reorganize itself; the prophet is severed from a smooth chronology and then must narrate herself back into regularity. This is to suggest, then, that the contractual structure of prophecy—as Blake has it, “if you go on So the result is So” (AnnWatson 14; E 607)—can be read as a symptom that attempts to manage the abrupt arrival of an immanent, uncanny Other by projecting a fixed narrative as compensation. Prophecy's forward-looking, predictive dimension might be understood, then, as consciousness' attempt to reestablish control of time and to re-mediate all events as they relate to the subject, such that he or she would never be surprised by dangers, even and especially apocalyptic dangers, as these wounds would be, as it were, lived through in advance. Through predictive prophecy—or prophecy converted into prediction—the future would become an extension of what Freud describes as consciousness' defensive shield, which

is tantamount to saying that the future is made conscious or known. Hence, the proliferation of apocalyptic prophecies not only in the 1790s but also in contemporary culture might be better understood as defensive mechanisms that aims to forestall actual trauma by narrating apocalypse fictionally, in advance, in order to make the experience, as it were, unmissable. Such narratives attempt, desperately and indeed futilely, to prepare consciousness for what is unconscious, to place the rupture *of* time itself *within* a temporalized narrative, as if to bypass or over-bridge the moment of discontinuity—to mourn in advance of loss, rendering that loss always already expiated.<sup>60</sup>

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud notes how “*protection against stimuli* is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*” (27). Hence, he presents two models of consciousness, where consciousness acts as a membrane to regulate the flow of incoming data. In Cathy Caruth’s words, we might call the first model “a model of quantity” where “the stimulus barrier protects the organism from ‘too much stimulus’ coming from outside” (Caruth 132 n.7). In other words, consciousness in this case deadens stimuli.<sup>61</sup> The second understanding of consciousness

---

<sup>60</sup> This argument bears comparison with Ted Underwood’s notion that the increasing interest in history in Romanticism represents a kind of sublimation of religious forms of comfort by secular modes of thought, a process wherein “the consolations of Christian collective destiny were [...] replaced by those of historical fame” (“Afterlife” 242). Not that this transition is that simple. Underwood argues, counterintuitively, that what catalyzes history’s secular consolations is not so much a fear of forgetting or of losing community but a drive to maintain class *distinctions* and historical *alterity*. The “culture” history aims to preserve is indissociable from class hierarchies insofar as the concept of culture itself acquires, in the eighteenth century, the sense of specialized knowledge available exclusively to the social elite. Hence, Underwood points out how “threats to the prestige of culture can be felt as threats to the continuity of history” (“Lives” 5)—that is, how what appear to be threats to historical memory are also threats to a sense of class superiority that historical thought would, in a rather conservative gesture, like in fact to maintain and participate in. Hence, if history gained affective capital through its absorption of desires for immortality that had been, in earlier times, answered by theological dogma—and if it accomplishes this through a concept of historicism aware that “no monument or ideal can hope to be as fundamental, as absolute, as change itself” (“Lives” 5)—the immortality it offers coincides with the perpetuation of a certain social stratification.

Where Underwood’s thesis comes closest to mine is, then, in the dialectic of the cultural phenomena he considers: for just as history repackages immortality at the moment of a broadly-felt spiritual crisis, so does prophecy attempt to recapitulate eternity in the face of time’s felt discontinuity. In both cases, however, history and prophecy reveal and exacerbate the anxieties at their respective origins and against which they were applied as antidotes. This is evident in the similarly ironic consequences history-as-immortality and prophecy-as-prediction face: where in the former case the “deadness of the past” that tends to “emphasize its difference” (“Immortality” 443) from the present is *necessary* in order, ironically, to preserve a grander sense of continuity, in the latter case, prophets in Romanticism seems often so obviously and persistently unreliable that the continuity they are supposed to generate tends toward its complete inversion.

<sup>61</sup> “But we have more to say of the living vesicle with its receptive cortical layer. This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies;

follows “a model of time” (Caruth 132 n.7). That is, Freud sees the work of consciousness itself as not only the psychic origin of our sense of time, but also takes time to be the specific dimension of consciousness that mediates external impressions:

We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves “timeless.” This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them. [...] [...] [O]ur abstract idea of time seems to be wholly derived from the method of working of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* [Perception-Consciousness] and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working. This mode of functioning may perhaps constitute another way of providing a shield against stimuli. (28)

In this model, consciousness renders stimuli harmless to the psyche not so much by deadening or diminishing their intensity but by placing stimuli in a linear sequence. Put differently, consciousness, like the prophet’s if-then contract or Wordsworth’s translation of the spots of time into palliative and productive moments in a larger, subjective *Bildung*, seeks to provide a conventional narrative for experience. And yet it should be immediately apparent that when Freud describes time itself as an agent of consciousness he already betrays time: for time is not identical to narrative, development, or a coherent logic. Time is not itself a form of ordering temporal things and yet that is how Freud treats time. In effect, Freud’s concept of time protects consciousness *from* time through a kind of denegation, that is, by treating time’s detotalizing exigency *as* its complete inverse: namely, narrative.<sup>62</sup> Just as the unsettling, discontinuous force of the prophet is almost instantly transformed into its opposite—the version of prophecy as prediction or the assurance of continuity—so time in Freud seems instantly confused with narrative. This does not drastically alter the logic of trauma but rather indicates that there is something, in the very theorization of trauma, that is uncanny: Freud and Caruth’s appeal

---

and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity. [...] By its death, the outer layer has saved the deeper ones from a similar fate [...]. *Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli*” (BPP 27)

<sup>62</sup> See chapter five for an analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Valperga* in terms of prophetic denegation.

to time as the agent of retroactive organization confuses discontinuity with continuity, confuses the recuperative, narrative exigency with a negativity that has more in common with the elusive experience of trauma or confuses, as noted above in the case of Wordsworth, anxiety with comfort.

At any rate, it is clear that the prophet is torn between an experience that is beyond narration and the demand to narrate that experience. Perhaps this is why Caruth's definition of trauma sounds also like a description of a prophet's possession by Divine power:

Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (92)

In other words, trauma results when a risk to life is 'experienced' without this moment being organized in terms of narrative sequence; the mortal danger is *so* direct or immediate that it fails to enter into consciousness and fails to enter into chronological ordering. The event seems to outstrip or to bypass the very system responsible for rendering the phenomenal world intelligible.<sup>63</sup> To be sure, the event *is* registered by the psyche (the mind has "a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known"). However, ultimately it only enters into conscious

---

<sup>63</sup> Freud does note Kant in this connection to his discussion of time on page twenty-eight of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For Kant, time is one of the two intuitions (the other is space) that make up the transcendental aesthetic, as outlined in the first few sections of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. As a matrix that defines one limit of possible experience, this notion of time is particularly static.

experience as a strange kind of return or repetition, originating somewhere “inside.”<sup>64</sup> It is a *strange* repetition because what is ‘repeating’ was never fully present in the first place. For something *to be present* (ontologically) it would have to be *in the present* (temporally) and that is precisely not the case with a traumatic event. As Caruth notes, “the return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (62).<sup>65</sup>

Part of the paradoxical ‘experience’ here—of this *immediacy* that is, nevertheless, *indirect*—stems from the fact that when the risk manifests itself, it is essentially a possibility with which the psyche is confronted in an intense fashion. In Caruth’s words, the close, but missed, encounter with death means that consciousness is “faced with the *possibility* of its death” (63, my emphasis). In fact, we could say that consciousness is ‘given’ this possibility since this is not an object. There is, after all, something odd about an experience of possibility as such, since possibility might be defined—and is so by Aristotle—as the ability not to be. In ‘encountering’ a possibility, then, consciousness encounters a certain kind of absence or perhaps, in Ernst Bloch’s terms, to which chapter five returns, something in the world that is “not-yet-conscious.” Hence, the apparently all too direct encounter with violence is radically deferred or indirect *in the same moment as this immediacy*, insofar as the ‘thing’ encountered (that is, possibility) is itself not actual or coherent in its presence and is not available on the horizon of objective presence. Trauma seems to mark an event of painful generosity. Hence, trauma understood in its most generous mode is nothing other than prophecy: it ‘gives’ the subject time and the possibility time as such opens in the actual; prophecy proffers what cannot be psychically economized, which is why it can claim such prodigality. In a sense, then, the work of mourning trauma is an attempt to return prophecy’s threatening gift, or to make it

<sup>64</sup> “In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation” (Caruth 59).

<sup>65</sup> Walter Benjamin understands this concept too and comes to it via Theodore Reik:

“For instance, we experience the death of a near relative...and believe that we feel our grief in all its depth..., but our grief reveals its depths only long after we think we have gotten the better of it.” The “forgotten” grief persists and gains ground; compare the death of the grandmother in Proust. “To experience [*erfahrung*] means to master an impression inwardly that was so strong that we could not grasp it at once.” This definition of experience in Freud’s sense is something very different from what is meant by those who speak of having “had an experience.” (Theodore Reik, *Der uberraschte Psychologe* [Leiden, 1935], p. 130-132 *qtd in The Arcades Project*, 402-403 [K8,1-K8,2]; Benjamin’s ellipses and editor’s brackets)

returnable, by registering the debt explicitly, by condensing the haunting ‘experience’ into a definitive mark.

This means that what is traumatic about trauma is less any single element or event and more the felt difficulty with *reintegrating* time and narrative. For, trauma emerges in the moment neither of experience nor the moment of missed experience but rather in the moment *when missed experience is experienced* or where the missed encounter with violence is registered *as* a miss. For instance, when Los in Blake’s *Milton*, upon discovering the damage to both Palamabron’s Harrow and Satan’s Mills, declares, “this mournful day/ Must be a blank in Nature” (8.21-22), the terrible damage wrought encounters the temporal rhythms of nature and human calendars in the ‘form’ of vacancy that will haunt the rest of the text as “self-annihilation.” Given that it is the experience of the *non*-experience of a decisive, empirical violence that contributes to the traumatized condition, the traumatized individual is left in the precarious onto-epistemological situation of “*having survived, precisely, without knowing it*” (Caruth 64; original emphasis). One cannot seem to account for one’s own survival. That is, one knows one has survived but cannot understand why or how this is possible. Traumatized survival becomes a kind of *sur-vival*—a sort of over-living that defies explanation. In rather Bataillian fashion, this suggests that annihilation becomes a ‘goal’ for the survivor as a way to encounter the missed encounter—or to actualize the missed encounter that managed, yet, to impact its full weight, as possibility, on the psyche, if not in a fashion that allowed the psyche to integrate that violence into a narrative that it could then understand or conceptualize rationally. Hence, the proleptic orientation of prophecy is both implied here (the possibility of an encounter with what was improperly mediated) and darkened, as the only way to correct experience—to synchronize history with subjectivity—is to encounter a mortifying moment that would in some way ‘kill’ (in the sense of negate) the subject by bringing the missed violence face to face with consciousness.



#### IV. 'Profit' and Loss: Banking on the Past

To suggest that the spots of time follow a traumatic itinerary that is indistinguishable from their ostensibly recuperative claims—each vector here interrupting the other's aims—is not to say quite enough. For if Wordsworth deploys prophecy as self-therapy this implies that the concept of the subject remains intact. However, to recall chapter one, prophecy might represent a form of ecstasy or exposure to what is radically temporal. Just as historiography tries to discipline time, so does prediction appropriate and discipline this disturbing mode of prophecy. In other words, while noticing the traumatic quality of the spots of time complicates their valiance and reveals a more recursive operation in what might otherwise look like a triumphant process of subjective cultivation, it neglects the more radical implications of the mystical tradition upon which Wordsworth seems to draw. That is, the same phenomenon called “trauma” might almost be renamed mystical “inner experience” were it not for a few crucial distinctions. First among these distinctions is that the mystic does not seek to be cured of his or her ‘trauma’; for the mystic, the missed experience is not really a *trauma* at all—although experientially it is analogous—in the sense that he or she does not recognize it as something to try to force back into a conditional realm of discursive reason or narrative coherence. Rather, there is an attempt to achieve and even to exacerbate that level of shocking intensity. Such an attempt seems to want to hold open rather than absorb the shock of time and pure possibility, to behold rather than shrink from a general economy of expenditure. Indeed, this is to suggest that what might be most traumatic is time itself in that time does not appear objectively and is totally misrepresented as narrative—something the following section of this chapter addresses at more length in terms of the imperceptible touch of time in Wordsworth’s gibbet-mast episode.

What is the relationship between mystical experience and the traumatic generosity of prophetic temporality? For Georges Bataille, human existence is radically discontinuous because it is essentially finite. Discontinuity is painful and results in suffering. This finitude inspires defensive reactions, reactions that attempt to take account of or to absorb this finitude through various kinds of (provisional) totalizations that allow humans to claim mastery over death, effectively appropriating radical negativity to a

broadly utilitarian system—a procedure, anticipating chapter three, analogous to what de Man sees as criticism’s tendency toward blindness. Bataille terms these reactions “projects.” Projects, however, represent an evasion of one’s being, for they aim to postpone one’s encounter with being through variously protracted processes, turning life into “a long deception” (*Inner* 39). “Narcotics” names these evasions or projects more precisely, as they tend to insulate humans from discontinuity and make individuals feel, at least superficially, better. Narcotics take various forms but what they all share is an attempt to introduce comforting closure or totality for the subject. They do this by appropriating negativity as a *means to* some kind of end, whether practical, intellectual, or spiritual—an operation perfected, in Bataille’s estimation, by Hegel. Hence, narcotics include a wide range of social and intellectual practices, all offering some kind of imaginary totality or *telos*. This could include one’s role in political, social, and economic reality and the sense of meaning one invents from this day-to-day activity. It also encompasses the Judeo-Christian “nostalgia for salvation” (*Inner* 43) or any broadly redemptive theism. In fact, the totality implied in any rational philosophical system must, also, fall under the umbrella of “project” and, for Bataille, Hegel becomes a frequent reference point in this respect: “*The Hegelian man—Being and God—is accomplished, is completed in the adequation of project [in that the Hegelian absolute subject has] become everything [and] does not fail, does not become comic, insufficient, but the private individual, the slave engaged in the paths of work*” (*Inner* 80). Indeed, the most powerful evasion—and with this Wordsworth’s project must come back into focus—might be the concept of the autonomous subject itself, for “to seek sufficiency is the same mistake as to enclose being in some sort of point” (*Inner* 88): “as *ipse* I wanted to be everything (through knowledge) and I fall into anguish” (*Inner* 53). As Bataille summarizes, through these sorts of projects and subjective *Bildung* especially “we turn away terrified [...] from those truths without a way out: any means of escape [so goes the logic of the addict] is good (philosophical, utilitarian, messianic)” (*Inner* 68).

Against this appropriation of discontinuity Bataille would “flee without end the horror of a reduction of Being to totality” (*Inner* 36) or the pompous claim to ‘master’ finitude through dialectical work. For human being cannot be completely absorbed in manufactured totality—not so much because humans have an excess of some sort but

because there is, rather, a recalcitrant kind of negativity, something that remains idle, useless, and that he will often associate with laughter and poetry: “poetry, laughter, ecstasy are not the means for other things” (*Inner* 110). That is, if projects amount to the “*putting off of existence to a later point*”—“life [...] put off until later, from postponement to postponement”—Bataille will posit that “inner experience is the opposite of action” (*Inner* 46): it is the elimination of postponement. Bataille inaugurates a general strike, as it were, where dialectical mediation is displaced in the name of an existential as opposed to a mechanical form of self-understanding, a relation that asks what it is to be human beyond the actions one performs for the sake of the projects one is forced to participate in: “when the extreme limit is there, the means which serve to attain it are no longer there” (*Inner* 50); “the annihilation of all middle terms [...] constitute[s] this negative mediation” (*Inner* 115). For only in this way, according to Bataille, can one reintroduce the “extreme limit of the possible” that action represses: “in the will to suppress pain, we are led to action [...]. Action led in order to suppress pain moves finally in the opposite direction from the possibility of dramatizing in its name: we no longer tend toward the extreme limit of the possible—we remedy pain (without great effect), but *the possible in the meantime no longer has any meaning*” (*Inner* 11, my emphasis).

Bataille suggests, adapting Heidegger’s thought, that anxiety is what reminds one of discontinuity—of one’s actual mode of being—by cutting through the comfortable surface of projects that, while pleasant, limit our possibilities as human beings. Hence, when Bataille, in the preface to *Inner Experience*, notes that “the self-acknowledged suffering of the disintoxicated is the subject of this book” (xxxii), he announces that his interest will be largely the experience of countering these narcotic countermeasures, of challenging those inventions that place human being at a distance from itself. In stark contrast to Wordsworth, the mystical, pseudo-project of Bataille’s own thought—his abject project, as it were—involves catalyzing, rather than absorbing, torment. At its most intense, in the “interior experience,” this torment and suffering becomes “rapture,” or an experience of *jouissance* that is as painful as it is pleasurable: “invention, words rape him. [...]. It is less a matter of contemplation than of rupture. It is however of ‘mystic experience’ that I speak” (*Inner* 40); recalling prophetic (dis)possession, Bataille calls

this “an ecstasy, a sudden rapture” (*Inner* 69). In contrast to the pseudo-continuity solicited through discursive reason or narcotic projects, the radical continuity glimpsed in mystical experience is beyond provisional totality, is absolute, and therefore annihilates the subject, saving the subject *from* the illusory salvation offered by the very concept of subjectivity. What is initially confusing, then, is that Bataillian ‘salvation’ is the same thing as self-destruction, though not in terms of the wretched ascetic—“*if asceticism is a sacrifice, it is only so in a part of itself which one loses with an eye to saving the other*” (*Inner* 23)—but rather through absolutely “excessive acts” (*Inner* 121). In fact, it will be precisely to this distinction that we must return in chapter four in order more clearly to see how Blake’s notion of redemption as “self annihilation” (14.22) in *Milton* serves as a counterpoint to Wordsworth: for while Wordsworth invokes mystical transcendence in his claim to prophetic election, he backs away from the radical subjective transformation that that same invocation implicitly demands. In so doing, Wordsworth cannot help but register the destruction of narcotics—of the self—in terms of a great injury.

What Blake calls “self annihilation” Bataille calls “sacrifice” and defines as the movement of “contestation,” that is, the active attempt to annihilate projects or narcotics in an effort to take the subject to his or her own inner limit where that subject glimpses a more radical continuity with the Absolute beyond atomic subjectivity: “the opposite of project is sacrifice” (*Inner* 136-137). Sacrifice, then, is only successful for Bataille if the subject who sacrifices is also the object sacrificed—“Lest,” in Blake’s particularly germane formulation, “the Last Judgment come & find me unannihilate/ And I be siez’d & giv’n into the hands of my own Selfhood” (*Milton* 14.23-24). Any recuperation of the “I”—any restriction of the general economy of expenditure by a restricted, recuperative *exchange*—betrays the failure of sacrifice, a failure to spend without reserve, or a failure to become resolutely hostile to the illusions of projects: “But I don’t attain the extreme limit on my own and, in actual fact, I can’t believe the extreme limit attained, for *I* never remain there” (*EI* 42, my emphasis); “As long as *ipse* perseveres in its will to know and to be *ipse*, anguish lasts, but if *ipse* abandons itself and knowledge with it, if it gives itself up to non-knowledge in this abandon, then rapture begins” (*Inner* 53). Indeed, like the gift, spending has to attain to annihilation if it is to escape mere exchange. This is why Bataille will identify sovereignty—in a kind of parody of Hegel’s thinking—with

absolute loss, not with any kind of control or victory. For what is ultimately slavish is to participate in the master-slave dialectic, as the ‘master’ becomes a slave to the work, the project of the dialectic, and the knowledge it produces as much as the slave does. To be sovereign, for Bataille, is to elude this thoroughly bourgeois fate. Hence, the title of his ‘work,’ *Inner Experience*, is rather ironic: it is ‘inner’ not in the sense of being interior to a subject but in the sense that “*it is necessary to reject external means*” (*Inner* 12); it is ‘inner’ only because it is not a public commodity. “Experience,” likewise, is not something that a subject possesses or has, but is a word for the dissolution of all projects—especially subjective *Bildung*—and the *jouissance* that dissolves the subject in an immediate encounter with the unconditional. As Blanchot comments with respect to Rilke, “‘experience’ here means contact with being” (*Space* 87). “Inner experience” is the mystical annihilation of discontinuous, finite existence that dissolves any boundary between inner and outer, not unlike Blake’s sense of visionary art as a form of creation that repudiates memory.<sup>66</sup>

Bataille is useful at this point in the discussion of Wordsworth as he provides a framework for understanding how Wordsworth’s claims of mystical enthusiasm are undermined through various economic processes, helping to explain why experiences that would in Bataille or Blake tend toward mystical rapture must in Wordsworth adopt a traumatic shape.<sup>67</sup> In fact, from the mystic’s perspective, *trauma is a kind of Bataillan narcotic* in that it makes the subject’s recuperation its main project and even, minimally, creates the condition and the demand for recuperating radical discontinuity. Trauma, in other words, figures the *jouissance* of a general economy of expenditure in terms of a debt, transforming what could be deemed a kind of disturbing generosity into a threat and

<sup>66</sup> See chapter four concerning Blake’s comments on allegory in “A Vision of Judgment” and *Milton*.

<sup>67</sup> It is also important to note that the concept of the sublime, even in its most negative moment of subjective disintegration, retains its status *qua* sublime only because it is absorbed again into a sense of the Ego’s reintegration at a higher, rational level that ultimately conserves and insulates the subject as such. For if, as Thomas Weiskel argues, “the Romantic sublime was an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation—spiritual, ontological, and (one gathers) psychological and even perceptual—was failing to be exercised or understood” (4), then the sublime, fundamentally, does not entertain the kind of ecstatic, prodigal movement described variously by Bataille and Blake but rather supplements reason. In fact, the sublime focuses, activates, and structures an otherwise diffuse sense of anxiety lurking beneath the increasingly prevalent sense, in the eighteenth century, of boredom: “Boredom masks uneasiness, and intense boredom exhibits the signs of the most basic of modern anxieties, the anxiety of nothingness, or absence. In its more energetic renditions the sublime is a kind of homeopathic therapy, a cure of uneasiness by means of the stronger, more concentrated—but momentary—anxiety involved in astonishment and terror” (Weiskel 18).

a wound. If prophecy appears psychically analogous to trauma, the very discourse of trauma ensures that the *jouissance* of prophecy or total expenditure is funnelled back into a restricted economy, such that the kind of prophecy that underwrites Wordsworth's poetry is—even in its darker iteration—ultimately synthetic and totalizing. Hence, while Wordsworth's spots of time are unable to become the purely restorative moments he claims them to be, the recognition of their traumatic and re-traumatizing underside in no way contests the general restriction of negativity that subjective *Bildung* performs throughout *The Prelude*. That is, Wordsworth feeds on the negativity that he seems to attempt to eliminate, something Collings likewise identifies when he argues that Wordsworth attempts to turn failure into success, error into inspiration, and so on. Put in terms of a pun that captures Wordsworth's relationship to prophetic time, this illustrates his persistent attempt to 'profit' from loss. That is, what may be more surprising than the duplicity of the restorative-traumatic moment and the recursive temporality it inaugurates, is that trauma—as a way of figuring *jouissance* as a debt—is far more akin to restoration than it might appear, as it takes shape only if the possibility of a general economy of expenditure is always already excluded or if the subject is already addicted to the narcotic of egoism.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> The relationship between trauma and prophecy is complicated by the fact that prophecy is a deeply ambivalent phenomenon that, on one hand, is identical to prediction and a restricted economy of expenditure and, on the other, hints at temporal detotalization or a general economy of expenditure. So, while the conventional sense of prophecy would claim to offer an insight that goes beyond trauma's blindness, or that it successfully encounters trauma's missed encounter, this is precisely not what prophecy, under its other aspect, would propose. Such 'insight' would just be another kind of blindness or another restriction of *jouissance*. In fact, this would be to confuse prophecy with mourning—a confusion I will return to in the opening section of chapter four. And this kind of confusion is exactly how conventional prophecy tries to discipline the discord that gives it rise in the first place. This is not to say, however, that trauma's more ostensibly recalcitrant negativity accurately models the kind of exposure to which the Romantic form of prophecy is especially sensitive. This is because trauma, in figuring exposure as a *missed* encounter, does *not*, in a sense, miss the encounter at all. Traumatic negativity does not really represent a general economy of expenditure—the corrosiveness of time—since it invites the *work of mourning*. Put differently, when trauma makes exposure or *jouissance* into the kind of negativity *susceptible to or available for mourning*, this suggests that the missed encounter is not so much absolutely missed as it is merely belated—that the miss is just a temporary and anomalous negativity that can always be reabsorbed. In fact, even in the duration of the miss, when experience is still outstanding, there is a kind of closure in the determination of this very distance as debt. This sense of recuperating negativity fits with the formulation of prophecy as prediction but not with the more ironic sense of Romantic prophecy. So, while trauma does offer a window on prophetic psychology, it does not seem quite right completely to identify prophetic and traumatic negativity, unless perhaps that trauma can be enormously dilated into a complete shape of consciousness—that is, unless trauma can move out of its containment in Wordsworth's episodic spots and become distributed across the entire surface of the 'work,' as in texts like Blake's *The [First] Book of Urizen*.

This exclusion can be sensed in biographical and historical terms given the larger, cultural project Wordsworth's self-professionalization represents. For instance, as Thomas Pfau notes, Wordsworth makes the lyric the ultimate anticommodity, but only to 're-invest' the affective and social 'returns' made on this genre in an adjacent type of economy, namely the production of English middle-class subjectivity:

Yet even in that context [i.e., the rise in the commodity status of poetry], Wordsworth consistently represented his poetry as an inalienable spiritual progeny and would insist at all times on its categorical immunity from all laws of commerce. In fact, he maintained, genuine poetry could only be properly appreciated as the supreme anticommodity. Whatever its contents or motifs, poetry had to be, in Wordsworth's effective and often persuasive conception, a strategy of defence against professionalization, specialization, and the psychological vacuum resulting from a seemingly interminable ascendancy, all of which had emerged both as the historical foundation of his middle-class audiences and as the structural threat to their psychological integrity. (Pfau 16)

Wordsworth's retreat from absolute expenditure, in other words, might stem in part from his historical situation, one where his very formation as a professional poet demanded a measured resistance to an increasingly mobile middle-class milieu. As Pfau puts it, "middle-class representation converged with the young discipline of political economy and its entirely new, far more pragmatic mode of accounting for a given individual's moral and economic status within an increasingly permeable social fabric" through the concept of "Professionalization" (25), the institutionalization of the project of subject formation.

In *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production*, Pfau is interested in how aesthetic cultural work in the late eighteenth century produces the very middleclass that produces (and consumes) this material; that is, Pfau is concerned with how culture produces itself. He suggests that the production and consumption of art becomes the formative mechanism of class in lieu of traditional forms of discipline and social organization that have been displaced by broader access to emerging markets and the wealth available there. That is, the aesthetic,

in terms that still echo the economic realm against which it is ostensibly positioned, seems to cultivate and inculcate a set of ‘proper values’—acceptable ‘interest,’ reasonable ‘investment,’ *et cetera*—that are supposed to promote a sense of essential Englishness and thereby gather together what looks to be an increasingly fluid, disparate, and unpredictable social group mobilized via economic enfranchisement. In his final chapter, on Wordsworth and Malthus, Pfau focuses on how both writers aim to curb reproduction, both biological and artistic. The aesthetic is thus not a mere consequence of historical circumstances but actively and dialectically engaged in an attempt “to contain the spiritual and material debts of its history by reconstituting that history in the shrewdly decontextualized form of a cultural heritage” (Pfau 4). One of the ironies here, however, is that the very force that promotes a concept of middle-class *coherence* is the potential *incoherence* of productivity: “Over time, such an alternately censorious or approving relationship between the Wordsworthian poet and his prospective audience was to fashion a once amorphous and mostly random ‘public’ into a *cohesive middle-class community* that believed it had distinguished itself through its seemingly *unlimited imaginative mobility*” (Pfau 9, my emphasis). Hence, there remains a very significant tension between this unlimited imagination and the ostensibly natural—although in fact rigorously disciplinary—literary and aesthetic forms in the period, something Pfau looks at in terms of, broadly, the picturesque and, more specifically, the ballad, lyric, and autobiographical genres.

Put differently, Wordsworth masterfully recuperates through cultivation—of himself and his audience’s tastes—the very energy he sets free through inspired poetry. This broader frame helps to illustrate how the traumatic dimensions of the spots of time are the consequence and extension of this larger alchemy of affect. When Wordsworth is placed into the longer view of the “volatile interaction between debt and imagination brought about by the establishment and gradual assimilation of public credit” (Pfau 22), it becomes clear that, for Wordsworth, to be a prophet is to make a profit—always to justify and to account for one’s claim to value.<sup>69</sup> That is, Wordsworth makes the most of his

---

<sup>69</sup> Where Bataille seems to welcome a general economy of expenditure, the absolute night of what he calls “communication”—wherein the terms in communication ‘share’ only a common, inoperative dissolution—Wordsworth everywhere aims to illuminate or avoid this darkness, to formulate ecstatic loss as something like a substantial quality or predicate of an exceptional subject:



rural dark materials—often scenes of loss and suffering—not perhaps in strictly financial terms (although this possibility is also evolving) but in terms of cultivating a certain set of ‘charged’ affective relationships. Indeed, Wordsworth’s characteristically deadpan description of “tragic sufferings” (7.501) suggests a reluctance to ‘spend’ emotion in effusive transports or in less than ‘economical’ expressions; as de Man says, “the precise shade of recorded affectivity, in Wordsworth, is so delicate in its refusal to make any concession to notions of sensory experience that it acquires an amazing power of recuperation in the face of the most unadorned destructions that the mind can imagine” (*Rhetoric* 86).<sup>70</sup> Hence, Pfau can say of Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage* that “the intensity of beholding and describing the scene of social misery [...] reveal[s] how the Picturesque [...] reproduces at the level of the symbolic the very same paradigm of productivity, investment, and maximized returns that has left Margaret and her fellow sufferers (or criminals) marooned in an economic wasteland of no speculative value to national economy” (33). Crucially, Wordsworth never lets pain get out of hand, so to

---

Unknown, unthought of, yet I was most rich,  
 I had a world about me—‘twas my own,  
 I made it; for it only lived in me,  
 And to the God who looked into my mind.  
 Such sympathies would sometimes shew themselves  
 By outward gesture and by invisible looks—  
 Some called it madness; such indeed it was,  
 If childlike fruitfulness in passing joy,  
 If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured  
 To inspiration, sort with such a name;  
 If prophecy be madness; if things viewed  
 By poets of old time, and higher up,  
 By the first men, earth’s first inhabitants,  
 May in these tutored days no more be seen  
 With undistorted sight. (3.140-155)

In contrast to Wordsworth’s effort to ‘profit’ from his madness (“I was most *rich* [...] if prophecy be madness”), Bataille argues that “we are only totally laid bare by proceeding without trickery to the unknown” (*Inner* 5).

<sup>70</sup> One might think of the “matter-of-factness” (*Rhetoric* 87) with which Wordsworth’s narrators in texts like *The Ruined Cottage* or “Michael” details the total destruction of a family, or the terse conclusion to the long, melodramatic passage, in the 1805 *Prelude*, on Vaudracour and Julia:

It consoled him here  
 To attend upon the orphan and perform  
 The office of a nurse to his young child,  
 Which, after a short time, by some mistake  
 Or indiscretion of the father, died. (9.904-909)

But then one might also think of de Man’s own rhetoric. For, de Man seems similarly deadpan in his treatment of often very affectively charged moments in literature. If, for Wordsworth, this technique leads to “an amazing power of recuperation,” does this complicate de Man’s skepticism at the end of a text like “Shelley Disfigured”?

speak—it is never wasted, insofar as it becomes an opportunity for another register of feeling, of ‘investment.’ And it is this same sense of conservation that will ensure that the spots of time will never enter a general economy of expenditure but will always be recuperated as, in Freud’s words, “a lesser unpleasure” than absolute rapture. In fact, it is tempting to refer to Bataille’s comments on Proustian memory as a commentary on Wordsworth’s very similar operation. For, if it is “the triumph of time regained” that Bataille sees as Proust’s “visible intention” (*Inner* 146), the same could be said of Wordsworth. But then the critique of the former would have to apply to the latter, too:

The triumph of reminiscences makes less sense than one imagines. Linked to the unknown, to non-knowledge, it is ecstasy freeing itself from a great anguish. With the help of a concession made to the need to possess, to know (deceived, if one likes, by *recognition*), a balance is established. Often the unknown gives us anguish, but it is the condition for ecstasy. Anguish is the fear of losing, expression of the desire to possess. It is a stopping-point before the communication which excites desire but which inspires fear. Should we give the slip to the need to possess—anguish just as quickly turns to ecstasy. (*Inner* 147-147)

What this helps to clarify is that Wordsworth, because he cannot “give the slip to the need to possess,” must encounter mystical experience not as rapture but as trauma.

Such recuperation is also an attempt to elude time, for time is a kind of absolute expenditure: it extends beyond any kind of appropriation by being and is resistant even to identification with the latent teleology of various forms of becoming (hence, both Hegel and Heidegger absorb time into narcotic projects) or development. Time, like the irony with which it shares a similar volatility and elusiveness, troubles all such determination. Hence, projects often attempt to appropriate time itself either in the form of prediction or more subtly through systematic schemes: processes of cultivation and development or historical narratives that negotiate irrationality in the effort to install some kind of clarifying continuity. The effect is once again to restrict time’s frightening prodigality, its intense detotalization that gives the future to history and narrative in giving no-thing. As Bataille notes, in a passage that could be read alongside Heidegger’s commentary on ontic historiography but that must also recoil onto Heidegger’s own project, “in common

conditions, time is annulled, enclosed within the permanence of forms or of changes which are foreseen. Movements inscribed within an order *arrest* time, which they freeze in a system of measures and equivalencies” (*Inner* 74). In fact, when Bataille suggests that “‘catastrophe’ is the most profound of revolutions—it is time ‘unhinged’: the skeleton is the sign of this, the outcome of decay, from which its illusory existence emerges” (*Inner* 74), he gestures toward the temporalization of history in Koselleck’s revolution of revolution. So, if prophecy is supposed to give time, one would always depart from such a prophecy empty handed<sup>71</sup>: any communication of ecstasy that would leave discourse intact would, in its very coherence and finitude, indicate its failure. Wordsworth, through the spots of time, always ‘takes something away’ from his early experiences, either in the form of traumatic or inspiring impressions (or both at once). In any case, this amounts to the conversion of ecstasy back into economic exchange, of time back into spatial narrative. That said, Wordsworth’s text undermines its own recuperative tendency in a more radical way, as the spots of time reveal a senselessness from which the speaker simply cannot profit. That is, temporality’s elusiveness deconstructs the traumatic economy that would restrict history to narrative by opening a gap at the very center of empirical impression; such a gap makes it impossible perfectly to absorb time into narrative because it reveals the absent ground or immanent difference of the very events that constitute narrative in the first place.

#### V. “the unimaginable touch of Time”

Book Eleven of the 1805 *Prelude* opens with the promise to document the trials of the “Imagination, How Impaired and Restored,” suggesting a confident itinerary of mourning and restitution. To this end, the poem turns to those “Points [...] within our souls/ Where all stand single” (3.186-7), the spots of time. Such moments, with their “renovating Virtue” (11.259), “Are scattered everywhere, taking their date/ From our first childhood” (11.274-5). The speaker, then, suggests that such instants originate from a moment of intense consciousness:

---

<sup>71</sup> “Allegory goes away empty-handed” (Benjamin *Origin* 233)

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
 Among those passages of life in which  
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind  
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense  
 Is but the obedient servant of her will. (11.268-72)

This valorization of the controlling mind is, however, somewhat doubtful or, recalling the prophetic call to prophecy in "Home at Grasmere," perhaps wishful. For, in the episode of the gibbet-mast, while the scene of "visionary dreariness" (11.311) that stands out in the poet's memory might indeed be the product of intense consciousness, that consciousness is itself the consequence of an unconscious tension that primes or readies the mind; while the "feeling, and diversity of strength" (11.327) in this scene is enshrined for "future restoration," it only has this power thanks to residual anxiety.

Thomas De Quincey, in 1839, famously recorded how Wordsworth understood this psychological economy. De Quincey recalls an occasion when the expectation of important news concerning the Peninsular War prompted both him and Wordsworth to walk out and wait near the road. De Quincey describes the scene of anticipation and the subsequent effects of disappointment on consciousness—for the intelligence did not arrive during their wait—Wordsworth apparently articulated:

At intervals, Wordsworth had stretched himself at length on the high road, applying his ear to the ground so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance.

Once, when he was slowly rising from this effort, his eye caught a bright star that was glittering between the brow of Seat Sandal and the mighty Helvellyn. He gazed upon it for a minute or so, and then, upon turning away to descend into Grasmere, he made the following explanation. "I have remarked from my earliest days that if, under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should then relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under any other circumstances. Just now, my ear was

placed upon the stretch in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the lake of Wythburn from the Keswick road; at the very instant when I raised my head from the ground in final abandonment of hope for this night, at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the infinite that would not have arrested me under other circumstances. (641)

In the case of the gibbet-mast, the young Wordsworth's consciousness is similarly primed by an imminent apparition when he witnesses obsessive engraving, that is, writing designed to keep a ghost confined by literally en-graving its murderous spirit:

Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.

The monumental writing was engraven

In times long past, and still from year to year

By superstition of the neighbourhood

The grass is cleared away; and to this hour

The letters are fresh and visible. (11.293-98)

The townsfolk's persistent repression of unruly spirits<sup>72</sup> is tantamount to the "attention" and "intense vigilance" mentioned by De Quincey. Yet, insofar as this repression successfully forestalls the ghost's return, so does the intense expectation of that return 'inspire' the speaker.

That is, for all of the effort, there is a sense that the letter cannot, finally, repress the spirit, as the feeling of trepidation itself transcends localization. In the perpetual postponement of the ghost, restless anticipation haunts the subject. In a manner of speaking, the 'spirit' of the gibbet-mast escapes engraving precisely when anxiety

---

<sup>72</sup> I am following here Collings' reading of what Douglass Kneale describes as the "monumental" letters" (137) inscribed by "Some unknown hand" (11.294) at the base of the moldering gibbet-mast. Elaborating on Kneale's analysis of Wordsworth's complex rhetoric in this episode, Collings suggests that there is a subtle reversal such that the maintenance of the gibbet-mast constructs the townsfolk *as* ghosts, as agents who haunt the grave in an effort to maintain the murderer's en-graving:

Without a coffin, without a proper burial, this dead man threatens to become a ghost, and only the engraved characters keep him in his proper place. The unknown hand carves the murderer's name not to memorialize him (to give him an epitaph) but, out of vengeful desire or superstitious fear, to keep him from returning to haunt the living. As a result, the anonymous engraver must continually return to this spot, haunt it, and become the living counterpart to the ghost that he fears. (145-6)

'possesses' the young Wordsworth, making him *impressionable*. In this, a certain notion of history—history as linear narrative—could be said, also, to escape from inscription or interment: for the past is perhaps not so decidedly past, nor the future something that can be confidently predicted via precedent, as the unlikely intensity of the subsequent experience attests. More specifically, there is here an existential awaking, as the protagonist is not exactly impressed by the experience of the gallows, but rather made capable, subsequently, of bearing impressions, thus revealing his historical receptivity, his being-historical or historicity. This complicates the episode's empirical language and the 'sense' of history and time at play. For, the child-Wordsworth is left *unmarked* by his experience at the gibbet only because he has been made eminently *remarkable*. Becoming remarkable does not, itself, leave a mark, but rather, anticipating the formulation of affect and memory discussed in chapter three, a hidden impression or an "obscure sense/ Of possible sublimity" (2.335-6). So, while the scene of the gibbet-mast itself is not taken as the restorative spot to which the mature speaker "repairs" in times of hardship, it is what makes possible the deep impression left by the otherwise "ordinary sight" (11.309)—an experience that *will* be one of these reparative spots. Hence, the renovating impression in Wordsworth's memory contains a double reference: not only does the spot of time recall a singular, extraordinary scene but it necessarily, if secretly, gestures to the gibbet-mast, to the preface of the impression, the unhallowed ground of engraving, or the disembodied intensity of vigilance.<sup>73</sup> In fact, this episode of exceptional impression deconstructs the empirical logic of impression at work elsewhere in *The Prelude*.

The language of sensible impression is especially prominent in the 1799 *Prelude*. There, for example, the speaker apostrophizes the "powers of the earth" (1.186) as agents who

[i]mpressed upon all forms the characters  
Of danger and desire, and thus did make  
The surface of the universal earth

<sup>73</sup> Taking the gibbet-mast episode as a fundamental element in the structure of Wordsworth's psycho-poetic economy helps to explain the generalizability of Hartman's apt description of Wordsworthian lyricism:

The traveler—man, the secular pilgrim—is halted by an affecting image. And something peculiar in the image, or the suspension itself of habitual motion, or an ensuing, meditative consciousness, brings him into the shadow of death. That shadow is lightened or subsumed as the poem proceeds, and the unusual image pointing like an epitaph to the passerby is transformed into a more internal inscription testifying of continuance rather than death. (*Wordsworth's* 12)

With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,

Work like a sea. (1.194-8)

Moreover, this monumental writing *on* the earth becomes the writing *of* the earth as the speaker becomes the ultimate archive or even the grave of history:

Distresses and disasters, tragic facts

Of rural history, that impressed my mind

With images to which in following years

Far other feelings were attached—with forms

That yet exist with independent life,

And, like their archetypes, know no decay. (1.282-7)

The speaker is eminently engravable. The impressions, moreover, are not superficial but take on an “independent life” that emulates changeless ideas or “archetypes,” importing a dubious kind of stability. For it is clear that the spots of time are the products of scarring and borrow their traumatic itinerary from the imagery of Druidic sacrifice that punctuates so much of Wordsworth’s poetry—moments that do not so much evade history as take narrative to its trembling limit in uncanny repetition. This shift from engraving nature to engraving the subject parallels the gibbet-mast scene as there, also, the speaker becomes the ultimate surface of impression. As such, we might recall Locke’s subject—particularly in his characterization of the mind as “white paper, void of all characters” (2.1.2). Indeed, as Hugh Sykes Davies suggests, “so far as the notion of ‘impulse’ [and perhaps “impression”] goes, he [i.e., Wordsworth] was in general agreement with them [the empirical philosophers], and his use of the word is not very different from the way it is used in [...] Locke” (162). However, Wordsworth also departs significantly, if subtly, from strictly Lockean epistemology given, for instance, “his insistence upon the potential significance of ‘one impulse,’ of one experience rather than a host of others” (Davies 162); Wordsworth, in contrast to Locke, suggests that there can be *exceptional impressions*.<sup>74</sup> These impressions are not made exceptional through perception, attention, or higher-order operations of reflection. They are exceptional, rather, because of the pre-existing conditions of the receptive subject. While the Lockean subject is “essentially

<sup>74</sup> This particular point supports the observation that while “Wordsworth’s psychology and affective diction are closely derived from the developed tradition of Lockean thought, [...] his meanings are not” (Weiskel 22).

passive and inactive” (Davies 157) at least in terms of the formation of Locke’s “simple ideas,” Wordsworth’s subject, on the contrary, is radically agitated.

The point here is that the exceptional impression in the gibbet-mast episode is lighter and yet more profound than any other, as it stages what Wordsworth, in the “Mutability” sonnet, calls “the unimaginable touch of Time” (14); in the caesura at the center of empirical impression, Wordsworth’s subject ‘senses,’ as it were, the radical openness and uncertainty of temporalized history.<sup>75</sup> This is to suggest that time itself is a kind of missed experience and that the prophet’s suffering—taken either traumatically or ecstatically—is a function of his or her immediate relationship to time’s own extemporaneity. Like the forgetful memory or ‘dismemberment’ discussed in chapter three in connection to Percy Shelley—a phenomenon that leaves Blanchot with a strange epistemological residue, the sense that he *will have* known something—Wordsworth has the ‘impression’ not that he knows time but that he will have known it, or that he had known it once before. For if all we ever have of time is a memory, this is a strange, self-displacing kind of memory that recalls us not to something objective but rather to the absence of presence or, better, the presence of absence, through a memory of forgetfulness. Wordsworth will always come back to time’s absent impression, will always experience the *missing of* experience, in his spots of time precisely because he does not directly return to the gibbet-mast episode but rather to the impressions it makes possible, the impression that *covers over* even as it gently discloses this unstable ground, one that writhes “like a sea.”

In fact, there is a sense, even in Locke, that the ‘lightness’ of time’s impression troubles empirical logic. This is especially evident in Locke’s own version of the gibbet-mast episode. For beyond Locke’s three best-known images of the mind—an “empty cabinet” (1.1.15), the aforementioned blank paper, and a “dark room” (2.11.17)—there is an often-overlooked fourth image: the mind as a tomb, its surface engraved by memory. In Book Two of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in the chapter “Of

---

<sup>75</sup> What Jean-Luc Nancy calls the nonsignifying aspect or ground of the image is something Wordsworth’s experience of the gibbet-mast helps to elucidate: “the image suspends the course of the world and of meaning—of meaning as a course or current of sense (meaning in discourse, meaning that is current and valid): but it affirms all that more a *sense* (therefore an ‘insensible’) that is *selfsame* with what it gives to be sensed (that is, itself). In the image, which, however, is without an ‘inside’ [or metaphysical substance that is different from its own appearance], there is a sense that is nonsignifying but not insignificant, a sense that is a certain force (its form)” (*Ground* 10-11).



Retention,” Locke suggests, in a strangely gothic passage, that memories fade just as actual memorials erode over time: “thus the ideas, as well as children, of our youth, often die before us: and our minds represent to us those tombs to which we are approaching; where, though the brass and marble remain, yet the inscriptions are effaced by time, and the imagery moulders away” (2.10.5). Locke’s metaphor here requires that we think of ideas as buried corpses. Memorial plaques—memories—constitute a temporary and fragile index: signs on dissolving surfaces that attempt, against time’s exhausting violence, to ‘plot’ ideas. As in Wordsworth, there is a pressing danger here that engraving, in every sense, will fail: even when engraving (in the sense of writing) in Locke’s metaphor *succeeds*, engraving (in the sense of “keeping in the grave”) *fails*, as it would call-up—literally re-member—the ‘corpse’ of meaning. Similarly, successful engraving (in the sense of writing) in Wordsworth’s gibbet-mast episode does not prevent but actually sustains a residual, haunting anxiety. This failure is, in each case, linked directly to the properties of the respective impressionable surfaces: for *sensitivity* is the necessary condition of impression even as sensitivity itself withdraws from positive impression with “steps/ Almost as silent as the turf they trod” (1.331-332); sensitivity is what grounds and at once ungrounds or volatiles impression, disclosing time’s elusive unruliness through this subtle fluctuation.

It is this return of the violent, though strangely impalpable—so, empirically ‘missed’—experience of time itself that structures, also, the Christmas vacation spot of time. The Christmas scene involves what Wordsworth, elsewhere, calls “the usury of time,” an error or injustice committed by predictive “sages, who in their prescience would controul/ All accidents” (5.379). Indeed, the precise terms of this predictive exigency anticipates the young Wordsworth’s position as he waits above two roads, expecting, along one or the other route, the arrival of a carriage to convey him home. In a sense, the schoolmasters addressed in Book Five force the speaker down one of these ‘paths,’ teaching the student a lesson about mastering time that Wordsworth will wish, later, not to have learned so well:

These mighty workmen of our later age  
 Who with a broad highway have overbridged  
 The froward chaos of futurity, (5.370-2)

manage, laments the speaker, to “Confine us down/ Like engines” (5.382-3). In an echo of Sin and Death who, in *Paradise Lost*,

[p]av’d after him [i.e., Satan] a broad and beat’n way

Over the dark Abyss, whose boiling Gulph

Tamely endur’d a Bridge of wondrous length, (2.1026-8)

these ridged masters would impose a deadly predictability on the “unreasoning progress of the world,” failing to see that “a wiser spirit is at work for us” in such ostensible errancy, or “even in what seem our most unfruitful hours” (5.384, 385, 388).

This “usury of time” that would impose a narrative sequence of events or a ‘single track’ of experience is, in Book Eleven, derailed. Geoffrey Hartman notes, for instance, how the speaker’s “anxiety of hope” (11.371) is complicated by his father’s abrupt death: “the father’s death, which supervenes as an ‘event’ (1.309), converts that moment of hope into an ominous, even murderous anticipation” (*Unremarkable* 24). Hence, “though there is no intervention of vision or voice, there is [in this instance] something like a special, burdened relationship to time. Wordsworth called the episode a ‘spot of time,’ to indicate that it stood out, spotlike, in his consciousness of time, that it merged sensation of place and sensation of time (so that time was *placed*), even that it allowed him to physically perceive or ‘spot’ time” (*Unremarkable* 23). As mentioned earlier, *spots* in time are also *stops* in time, as the notion of chronological progression is disrupted by the retro-activity of the death, such that the ‘present’ moment of anxious hope had not been experienced, as it were, felicitously, making its presence strangely absent or converting it into a mere trace of itself: as if time and affect, as in the gibbet-mast episode, were out of synch. There is, in a sense, a missed encounter with imminent death. Or, in terms of the tyrannical schoolmasters, Wordsworth’s initially excessive hope to see a carriage as a means to the imminent, happy holiday constitutes temporal usury, or demands an experience from the future that ‘over taxes’ the future’s radical uncertainty. “In retrospect, then, a perfectly ordinary mood is seen to involve a sin against time” as the speaker’s desire to return home quickly “seems to find retributive fulfillment when the father’s life is cut short ten days later” (*Unremarkable* 24).

Unlike the scene of the gibbet-mast, here the *remarkable* moment of temporal sensitivity *comes after* the visionary dreariness of the scene—“the single sheep, and the

one blasted tree,/ And the bleak music of that old stone wall” (11.381-2)—making that scene impressive retroactively by introducing impressionability itself retroactively. With a backward glance, the cryptic moment is revealed as withholding a deadly foreboding—that is, the moment’s hidden prophetic quality is not so much exposed as recognized as hidden, whereas this was completely overlooked in the original episode. The desire to return home, to hasten time, and to determine the road on which the carriage would arrive disguises the ‘real’ affect of the scene by arriving, too quickly, at a chrono-logic or too abruptly establishing a narrative arc. Time’s usury, or prophecy as prediction, confuses the prophet with profit—twisting the gift into a debt that seems cruelly expiated only by the father’s death—and fails to heed Socrates’ example of profitless prophecy. For as Kierkegaard relates, “it is a familiar fact that Socrates was quite proud of not taking money for his teaching and often spoke of it with considerable bravado. Undeniably this most frequently was said with deep irony directed at the Sophists, who charged so much that in the opposite sense their instruction became almost incommensurate with money and monetary value” (*Irony* 186).

In a similar vein, de Man’s “Wordsworth and Hölderlin” argues that a certain anticipation of imminent death infiltrates the famous lines of sublime depth in Book Five of *The Prelude*:

[T]hen sometimes, in that silence, while he hung  
 Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise  
 Has carried far into his heart the voice  
 Of mountain torrents. (406-9)

De Man suggest that the verb “hung” is, itself, ‘echoed’ later on, in the description of how “the churchyard hangs/ Upon a slope above the Village School” (417-18). Thus, de Man argues that “the boy’s surprise at standing perplexed before the sudden silence of nature was an anticipatory announcement of his death” (53-4). Moreover, for de Man, this experience is something like a belated recognition of authentic finitude: “a lively, pleasurable entertaining but destructive world strikes up against a reflective and silent world what stands nearer to an authentic understanding of our situation” (55). This “gentle shock” is stored in the boy’s affective battery, as it were, like an involuntary memory or a memory trace only to *return as an anticipation of death*, rather like the

“anxiety of hope” passage that the speaker *returns to* as an *anticipation of death*. In each case, moments become proleptic only analeptically. As a restorative moment, then, this description of suspenseful listening would aim to redeem the lost time of average everydayness by hearing an even deeper, uncanny silence in the ‘original’ experience of “mild surprise.” And yet, what this listening hears is an affirmation of finitude, rather than a more conventionally comforting narcotic, therein skewing the affective register.

For de Man, as if applying Bataille’s philosophy to literature, “the essential poetic moment above all other poetic moments is that of the transition from one world to the other”—that is, from a world that is “entertaining but destructive” to the “reflective and silent world” (55). As such, poetry involves a layering of vision, where the poem “illuminates this midpoint [between these worlds] from which it glimpses its inauthentic past in the light of the precarious knowledge of its future” (55). Hence, for de Man, experiences of ostensible failure in Wordsworth function as important points of authentic insight, but only well after the fact—a delay Wordsworth himself dramatizes. As de Man continues,

for the interpreter of history, it [the movement from act to interpretation] is never a simple and uniform movement like the ascent of a peak or the installation of a defensive social order. Rather, it appears much more in the twilight in which for Wordsworth the crossing of the Alps was bathed, in which the coming-to-consciousness is in arrears vis-à-vis the actual past, and consequently is to be understood not as a conquest but rather as a rectification or even a reproach. The future is present in history only as the remembering of a failed project that has become a menace. (58-9)

In other words, there is something prophetic here, but not in the sense of simple anticipation, for the future is not an abundance hidden within the present. Rather, consciousness recognizes its own possible futures only in a moment of retrospection, emphasizing a certain absence in the present or a missed encounter with presence. Consciousness folds back on itself and seems to call to its earlier self—and the futures pertaining to that earlier self—from a position of greater self-understanding, gathering time together in a manner akin to Heidegger’s discussion of *Sorge*, “care,” in *Being and Time*. Just as care gathers together the existential temporalities of *Dasein*, so

Wordsworth's sense of the future emerges through a process of retrospective redemption, such that time's forward orientation emerges only when crossed by memory's retreat, turning the present into something strangely missed, like Wordsworth's ascent of the Alps. For as de Man argues, "Wordsworth[,] through the gap that separates the completion of an action from its understanding[,] [...] discloses a general structure of poetic temporality," where this temporality "lends duration to a past that otherwise would immediately sink into the nonbeing of a future that withdraws itself from consciousness. It is thus an act through which a memory threatened with its own loss succeeds in sustaining itself" (64). Yet, from the perspective of Romantic prophecy, the emphasis here must be less on memory's successful recuperation of the imminent loss of time than the recognition that, in Wordsworth, time's senselessness manages to express itself in its very apophysis or retreat from sense. For, as discussed above, time itself does not perform any protraction of memory or extension of consciousness.

This reversal, where a scene becomes remarkable—where its futurity opens up—retroactively but only because hope is re-contained as 'sin,' seems to make it all the more difficult to understand the spots of time as simply restorative. While the encounter with the gibbet-mast can fade, at least partially, into the background of the subsequently sublime vision, or where the echo of "hung" in Book Five can be conveniently overlooked by the speaker and reader alike, it seems that the Christmas vacation episode, specifically, makes unmistakably explicit that a return to the moment of waiting and wishing must entail a return to guilt and sorrow. That said, this is a covert, even cryptic form of guilt. Following Weiskel's observation, if the speaker can truly feel *guilty*—something he seems especially capable of throughout *The Prelude*—as opposed to merely sad about the death of his father, this immediately implies some kind of moral transgression. In other words, the emergence of guilt, and that it is the speaker's "desires" (11.374) that are corrected, suggests that the speaker, on some level, might wish for the death of this father. This, alone, is perhaps too cliché, too bluntly Oedipal to warrant extended analysis. However, there may be another dimension to this taboo longing: it is no accident that the death of the father overlaps with the birth of the Son, as the young speaker expects to return, specifically, to celebrate the Christ-mass holiday. The birth of Christ anticipates the gift of death, the final sacrifice of the Son by the Father—the

ultimate gift that would sacrifice itself and transcend the violence and mourn the trauma, definitively lose the loss—of pre-Christian society. Indeed, the contraction of time performed not only in the anxiety of hope episode—where celebration overlaps with regret, wishful contraction with belated protraction—but in the spots of time more generally suggest that the birth of Jesus might, too, be read in terms of his final crucifixion. The question of sacrifice resonates throughout *The Prelude*, such that the Christmas vacation can hardly be read as an innocent time of festivity but rather links the episode to broader worries about history's violence.

#### IV. "Timely Utterance"

There is, specifically, a lingering fear in *The Prelude* that history, while apparently progressing, may in fact be regressing, or that the possibility of regression coincides with and haunts *Bildung*. Book Eight, *Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind*, proposes to trace the moral development of the speaker, his emergence, to recall "Tintern Abbey," from "the coarser pleasures" of "thoughtless youth" to a more refined awareness of "the still, sad music of humanity" (73, 90, 91). Beginning with nature's inspiration, the speaker claims to find, ultimately, "lovelier far than this" "the heart of man" (8.144, 151). This evolution is, however, suspended by persistent nightmares: "images of danger and distress/ And suffering, these took deepest hold on me" (8.211-12). And before we get to any confirmation of progress' traction, the speaker relates—in the 1805 version, at least—one such "image of dark distress," a story not merely of loss but of a potential spiritual and moral regression. The speaker recalls the tale of "a shepherd and his son" who, in the midst of an intensifying storm, sought "a straggler from their flock" (8.223, 225). Once separated, the son, returning to the animal's birthplace, "spied the sheep upon a plot of grass/ An island in the brook" (8.270-1). The lamb is poised on what looks like an alter—"It was a place/ Remote and deep, piled round with rocks"—recalling images of what Wordsworth would perhaps understand as pre-cultural sites of sacrifice, akin to the round, piled stones of Stonehenge in "Guilt and Sorrow" and there associated with the "sacrifice [...] of living men"

(123).<sup>76</sup> The situation also involves, however, a problem of substitution, recalling but also complicating Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. That is, the boy tries to rescue the sheep and "leapt upon the island with proud heart/ And with a prophet's joy" (8.279-80).

---

<sup>76</sup> This scene finds company with a series of similar images that displace, according to Alan Liu's *Wordsworth, The Sense of History*, the images of Stonehenge that punctuate Wordsworth's *oeuvre*. Liu follows these transformations of Druidic sacrifice from *Salisbury Plain* (1793) through the Parneth Beacon and Celtic mound in "1794," to Wordsworth's recorded memories of Gibbet Moss, in Hawkshead, through *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* (1795), *The Borderers'* (1796-7) Ruined Castle and bent tree, until finally reaching the 1805 *Prelude* with both the vision of Sarum's Plain in Book Twelve and the gibbet-mast and blasted Hawthorne spots of time in Book Eleven (Liu 203). While Liu reads this transformation as a species of historical repression that substitutes prehistory for the pressing tensions of the Revolution—what he calls earlier "a sustained effort to deny history" (13) and later "a refugee flight of forms, a rush to escape history" (223)—it seems, rather, to offer a different mode of history all together, one that, far from repressing history, *cannot* repress history successfully, curling, therefore, into a more recursive, obsessive pattern. Indeed, Liu's thesis that Wordsworth aims to evade history relies on a concept of history as a linear narrative that has been ontologically hollowed-out and subsequently stitched together in a 'recuperative' epistemology. This approach yields what Liu curiously calls "positivism" even though it quite explicitly severs itself from any claims to knowledge of reality as such.

That is, Liu is quick to sacrifice any existential analysis of history, nature, or the subject: "*There is no nature [...]. There is no time. There is no affection. There is no self or mind. Therefore, there is no Imagination*" (38; Liu's emphasis). That is, as Liu elaborates later, "there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government" (104). It is an expansion of this basically skeptical logic that underlies his other denials: there is no-thing aside from the apparatus that make phenomena possible. In the absence, then, of any grounding being, Liu can suggest, "if there 'is' no history, then the relevant problem becomes the knowledge or *sense* of history in the full sense" (40). This approach has the virtue of undermining transcendental schemes of history and understanding history as a discourse constructed by human understanding. The problem, however, is that this reduction of history to the sensible and the intelligible ignores the role of the senseless and the irrational in the emergence of history—for history is a discourse that recognizes, addresses, and attempts to negotiate this kind of negativity. In fact, the disabling limitations of Liu's approach are perhaps most clear when it comes to the possibility of historicizing the rise of historical consciousness. Unless Liu thinks consciousness and human nature are unchanging and eternal ideas (which seems to conflict with his materialism), the particular shape of consciousness that spurs historical thinking—the historical "sense"—must itself have a history.

Yet, in a strange way, Liu's form of history is predicated on the impossibility of historicizing itself. As he argues, the particular forms of culture one can catalogue—political, economic, social, aesthetic, discursive, *et cetera*—follow a logic of "determinate arbitrariness" (43): beyond what is actual, determinate, and empirically sensible, there is no kind of order, only pure arbitrariness. The problem is not that Liu rejects any immanent or transcendent order or that he argues strongly that order, in all senses, is an invention of the human intellect: that much seems perfectly consistent. The problem, rather, is that Liu rejects the possibility that something insensible, irrational, or unconscious might have an *effect* on what is sensible. The rejection of this possibility, resultantly, makes it difficult to offer a compelling history of the emergence of history, since the notion that the historical sensibility itself emerges out of non-being—that it is finite and non-transcendent—requires a willingness to see historical phenomenon as products of perhaps arbitrary but certainly more complex and perhaps inchoate desires, fears, hopes, and so on. For in an important way, the emergence of history as a discourse of sense-making, while it cannot be explained by appeal to one single phenomenon or explained by some form of overarching teleology in human development, still has causes—multiple, conflicting, and incoherent as they may be. Hence, Liu's "positivism"—one can positively know the determinate-if-arbitrary phenomena of culture and history—reflects precisely the kind of historiography that detemporalizes history, that treats history only once its corrosive negativity and immanent possibility has been disciplined enough to lend the historian his or her privileged, stable, and in effect un-historical footing.

Indeed, this metaphor of prophetic joy is, itself, inauspicious—stresses the violence rather than transcendence of prophecy—given the provenance of the so-called “Brothers Water (named/ From those two brothers that drowned therein)” (8.231-2) that serves as the setting for the tale. Yet, it also sets an appropriate tone, as prophetic joy or ecstasy is, as noted, impossible to separate from prophetic suffering—especially in the Old Testament. The boy’s efforts do, indeed, prove tragic as

[i]mmediately

The sheep sprang forward to the further shore

And was borne headlong by the roaring flood. (8.280-282)

The line break between 281 and 282 heightens the sense of sudden loss, as the sheep seems for a moment to have accomplished the leap; the preposition “to,” however, disguises an implicit “toward,” such that the sense of relief, like the sense of relief upon arriving home for Christmas in Book Eleven, proves awkwardly premature.

The scene’s symbolic implications, however, may prove to be even more disturbing than this confusion of joy with loss—a confusion not unlike the confusion of comfort with anxiety discussed earlier. In one sense, this is a reversal of Abraham’s substitution of the lamb for Isaac as the boy is trapped on the sacrificial alter: “so he stood,/ A prisoner on the island” (8.287-8). It is not, however, simply a matter of regression here but also, as seems repeatedly at issue in Wordsworth, of a confusion of forward with backward movement in history. The Christian transcendence of sacrifice as such—whether human or animal—involves a reversal of the Abrahamic reversal, where the Father again sacrifices the Son.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, such a representation of the sacrificial scene calls its symbolic efficacy or its role as the ground of a properly symbolic culture into question. For as Collings suggests, “Wordsworth departs from the typical rendition of human sacrifice as demonic violence,” arguing that “sacrifice is less the practice of cruelty for its own sake than the sign of the failure to turn sacrifice into a symbolic act” (29). The persistence of actual sacrificial practices suggests the failure of symbolization

<sup>77</sup> “The gentle Lamb was very roughly slaughtered in this doctrine. As though the God who stood over him was a God of simple fear, only to be appeased with bowls of blood. The regression to barbaric times and usages is gross indeed, and even more astonishing is the regression from ‘hallowed be thy name’ to this barbaric conception of God. [...] Paul, with his Golgotha of sacrificial death, revoked this mountain [i.e., Moriah or the place of the ostensible end of human sacrifice] and rewrote the Prophets” since they frequently condemned sacrifice (Bloch *Atheism in Christianity* 175).



or serves, perhaps, as a reminder that even such symbolization does not necessarily suspend violence, but merely translates it into socially acceptable forms of political and economic conflict (Collings 31). Indeed, one way to read Wordsworthian prophecy is as an acute vision of the persistence of radical violence in culture that does not so much predict the future as illustrate how contemporary, ostensibly progressive society is haunted, occupied, or contaminated by the past and how this might limit the future to repetition. Hence, if the prophet is typically understood as full of future knowledge,

Wordsworth refuses such an idealizing reading. Receiving the prophetic mantel would make him one more instance of a familiar type, the prophet. He defines himself instead as a failed prophet or rather someone whose relation to prophecy could only be described in terms of deferral or failure. His conception of the authorial self is not comforting; it is the site not of vatic fullness nor of despairing emptiness (another version of the same) [i.e., just as theology and negative theology both still affirm a Divine essence], but rather as Francis Ferguson, in another context, has called the “noncoincidence of the subject with itself” (117). It is neither present nor absent but both/neither present and/nor absent, positioned where it is not and absent where it is, never capable of being isolated in its proper place. (Collings 129)

A latter-day Jonah, the Wordsworthian prophet seems acutely aware of the *failures* of *successful* symbolic substitution. As the pre-sense of that failure, the tale of the shepherd and his son prefaces or foreshadows the “anxiety of hope” episode of Book Eleven. That is, regressive sacrifice seems to infiltrate symbolic order when the reversal of Abraham’s substitution of Isaac for the lamb is, itself, reversed, but in such a way as to illustrate the potential regression in the Christian re-substitution of the victim—not only because this gestures back to the Old Testament familial structure but because it suggests that even the supposedly successful sacrifice *of* sacrifice only enshrines social violence.

It is precisely this split road, where one cannot distinguish the path of regression from that of progression, that complicates the act of psychic as well as geographic return in the Christmas vacation spot of time—a confusion set in play through time’s palpable elusiveness in the gibbet-mast episode, where time ‘appears’ not as a stabilizing entity

but as the disconnect within sense. In the speaker's anticipated return home, in other words, one might see the return of the Son to the place of sacrifice and paternal violence—given, especially, that Christmas commemorates the arrival of humanity's ultimate scapegoat and cannot but gesture, in the very moment of joyous celebration, toward betrayal and tragedy: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46). Indeed, there are two senses in which the return *to* the father might be understood, rather, as the ghostly and potentially threatening return *of* the father. Moreover, this haunting takes place in the very moment that the speaker has turned his trauma into a source of solace, or has ostensibly absorbed a "beneficent influence" (11.278) from the upsetting memory. First, as several critics point out,<sup>78</sup> the

[m]ist

Which on the line of each of those two roads

Advanced with such indisputable shapes (11.379-81)

echoes *Hamlet*, where the father's ghost appears as a "questionable shape" (1.4.43). In fact, this line echoes and modifies Shakespeare's double sense of "questionable" as both "uncertain" and "subject to questions," in that "indisputable" seems to suggest not only certainty but something beyond or resistant to dialogue. In a strange restitution of past experience, the bleak scene of waiting becomes, *indisputably*, pregnant with the future. And yet this fullness or certainty of the moment's relation to the future manifests itself in a *haunting* return of the father. In other words, in hindsight, the speaker's environment is understood as 'full' of absence, full of the father's impalpable, vaporous return. It is as if the starkness and emptiness of the scene itself offered a missed hermeneutic potential.

It is, however, to precisely this empty fullness that the speaker "often would repair and," though a rather Shelleyan hydrological condensation, "thence would drink/ As at a fountain" (11.383-4). With this locution comes the second return of the father. That is, the word "repair" is semantically rich and warrants special attention: from its root in *reparare*, it means "to return to" as well as to "fix," both denotations particularly appropriate to Wordsworth's apparent intention. The spots of time are, after all, supposed to serve as sources "for future restoration" (11.342), and as such the frequent return

<sup>78</sup> See Jonathan Wordsworth's *Borders of Vision*, page 63, and Jonathan Bate's *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, page 116.

(repair) to such spots ought to have a palliative (repairing) effect. Yet, the word seems also to undercut both these meanings. For one, it introduces, subtly, a sense of doubling, of pairing as “putting in pairs,” which invokes, irresistibly, the sense of paring as “cutting.” But it also rather uncannily recalls the father. As Geoffrey Hartman notes, the word “repair” is linked etymologically to “repatriate” and hence, via Latin, to words like “patriarch.”<sup>79</sup> Hence, in an ironic way, every time the speaker “repairs” to one of these spots of time in an attempt to restore or renovate himself, he also, in the very same gesture, returns to the father or, more problematically, solicits the *return of the dead* father—calls on the return of the very pain and suffering that he had promised, in the title of Book Eleven, to move beyond.

Once again, paths cross and overlap such that the action of return, undertaken in a therapeutic spirit, cannot help but invoke, simultaneously, the very source of guilt, anxiety, or perhaps even violence it would like, ultimately, to translate into prophetic inspiration—just as sacrifice is supposed to translate violence into symbolic sociability and yet seems rather, in the Marxian reading, to perpetuate violence through socio-economic hierarchies. While some kind of amelioration does occur in each case, it is impossible to impose an unambiguous significance on the ‘reparative’ impulse. Part of this is because it is becoming increasingly difficult, following the French Revolution, to rest assured—despite Kant’s argument—that history and the self are progressing as “indisputably” as the shapes of death down Wordsworth’s paths. Or, in the words of Nikolas Kompridis, just as Romanticism encounters a new, ambiguous sense of time there is an increasing demand for a temporal ordering that this same period in fact suspends: “as we are hurled forth into the future at an ever-accelerating speed, there is less and less time and, therefore, more and more pressure to bring into some intelligible pattern the shifting relationships between the past, the present and the future” (41). As if in response to this demand, in Book Four of *The Prelude* Wordsworth offers an elaborate simile that figures temporality in terms of a self-reflection. Yet, there are two significant

---

<sup>79</sup> Wordsworth’s “to which I oft repaired” (1.325) convinces Hartman that the word “inclines [...] toward its original sense of ‘return,’ or more specifically, ‘return to one’s native country,’ *repatriare*. [...] The relation of ‘repair’ to its etymological source is as tacit as [an] unconscious process; so it may simply be a sport of language that when Wordsworth introduces the notion of ‘spots of time’ a hundred or so lines before this, he also uses the word, though in its other root meaning of ‘restore,’ from *reparare*” (*Unremarkable* 236-237).

ambiguities in this passage. First, it is unclear if the subject is supposed to invest the landscape with order and coherence or, conversely, if the environment is supposed to lend stability to the subject.<sup>80</sup> Second, regardless of who is supposed to be stabilizing whom, this particular image of temporal organization itself begins to lose its coherence; ironically, the very process of temporal ordering becomes disordered. Like the nearly impalpable sense of sensitivity disclosed in the gibbet-mast episode that is indicative of the temporalized subject, this 'image' of time dissolves in and through its transparency, retreating from visibility as quickly as sensitivity escaped from sensation or en-graving from the tomb:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side  
 Of a slow-moving boat upon the breast  
 Of a still water, solacing himself  
 With such discoveries as his eye can make  
 Beneath him in the bottom of the deeps,  
 Sees many beauteous sights—weeds, fishes, flowers,  
 Grots, pebbles, roots of trees—and fancies more,  
 Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part  
 The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,

---

<sup>80</sup> In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man sees this as a persistent ambiguity in Wordsworth's poetry as well as in Romanticism more widely. De Man notes that "Wordsworth is more clearly conscious of what is involved here [i.e., in the relation of the part to the whole in the Romantic symbol] when he sees the same dialectic between self and nature in temporal terms" (204); in maintaining the continuity of experience that the symbol, according to Goethe, facilitates, Wordsworth would "borrow, so to speak, the temporal stability that [the subject] lacks from nature, and [...] devise strategies by means of which nature is brought down to a human level while still escaping from 'the unimaginable touch of time'" (204). And yet, de Man notes that the ostensible "temporal" stability of the symbol is undermined by this stability's ambiguous aetiology. It is not clear, for de Man, whether nature lends stability to the Romantic subject, or if subjective contemplation organizes contingent, external impressions. In other words, translucent eternity and temporal flux are not easily mapped onto subject and object positions. Hence for de Man "the contradiction [that, at times nature seems to take priority over the self, and at other times the self seems to organize nature] reaches a genuine impasse. For what are we to believe? Is romanticism a subjective idealism, open to all the attacks of solipsism [...]? Or is it instead a return to a certain form of naturalism after the forced abstraction of the Enlightenment, but a return which our urban and alienated world can conceive of only as a nostalgic and unreachable past?" (204-5). De Man traces this ambiguity to a slippage in the romantic critical vocabulary, where "the relationship between mind and nature becomes indeed a lot less formal, less purely associative and external than it is in the eighteenth century" (203). Specifically, he notices how, in the effort "to find terms better suited to express this relationship" between the subject and nature that "words such as 'affinity,' or 'sympathy,' appear instead of the more abstract 'analogy,'" a change that "indicates a gliding away from the formal problem of a congruence between the two poles to that of the ontological priority of the one over the other. For terms such as 'affinity' or 'sympathy' apply to the relationships between subjects rather than to relationships between a subject and an object" (203).

Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed  
 The region, and the things which there abide  
 In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam  
 Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,  
 And motions that are sent he knows not whence,  
 Impediments that make his task more sweet;  
 Such pleasant office have we long pursued  
 Incumbent over the surface of past time—  
 With like success. (4.247-264)

In this metaphor, time is analogous to reflection. But the “surface of past time” is laden with chronology’s sudden abridgement, such that looking into the past might be indistinguishable from looking into the future. Hence, looking into the future, prophetically, cannot then be distinguished from looking backward. For, this moment of gazing into the water involves an irreducibly doubled vision, where the image of *submerged* objects blends with the reflection of the sky on the water’s hyaline *surface* and induces temporal vertigo. In fact, the logic of the simile demands more attention. Are the objects visible below the surface supposed to relate, analogically, to the past? Do the images reflected on the surface represent the present and the things, themselves, reflected the (idea of the) future? Even as the image solicits these Platonic questions, it may be impossible to determine an answer, for the spatial dimensions of “below” and “above” collapse through the semi-transparency of water in the very articulation of the scene, dissolving the hierarchy initially constructed.

For this is, again, the strangely unstable ‘sea of engraving’ discussed above. Like Shelley’s “printless air” that manages to record marks from Panthea’s “belated plumes,” her ‘delayed pen,’ in *Prometheus Unbound*, here the water column becomes a legible surface even though it seems to be constitutively un-engraveable (after all, a boat cannot move through frozen water), or just as quickly to allow what is ‘engraved’ there to float to the surface (*Prelude* 2.1.34). In fact, if this passage makes an autobiographical gesture—“now is crossed by gleam/ Of his own image”—this places the self within an unreliable chronology and threatens the narrative reliability of the self-reflexive passage. As de Man suggested, “the future is present in history only as the remembering of a failed

project that has become a menace" (59); hence, one wonders if the drowned swimmer—another face that "rose" unexpectedly "while from a boat others hung o'er the deep" (5.450, 446 [1850])—signals the speaker's interrupted, menacing self-reflection, which in turn presents this past moment as the sudden, retroactive encounter with the future as the speaker's own imminent death. Such overlapping trajectories square with Weiskel's psychological point that "Wordsworth often seems to be reading the past as if it were the future and the future as if it were the past, [because] memory and desire are linked as derivatives from the [single sense of existential] vacancy" (144) that troubles the subject.

Put differently, this figure for autobiographical reflection—the very mechanism or machinery of subjective *Bildung* and thus the heart of *The Prelude*'s containing, narrative logic—is marred not only by temporal disjunction but also by a complex echo between the 1805 and the 1850 versions of *The Prelude*. The scene of the drowned man in Book Five represents, in 1805, something of a solitary experience for the speaker, such that he seems to meet the "ghastly face, a spectre shape" (5.472) more intimately. In 1850, however, the passage both intensifies and dissipates the autobiographical coordinates, as if putting the face under erasure. That is, Wordsworth inserts a phrase in 1850 that clearly echoes the image, in Book Four, mentioned above, of "one who hangs down-bending from the side/ Of a slow-moving boat" (4.247-8) when he describes, in the drowned swimmer episode, how "from a boat others hung o'er the deep" (5.446). With this, Wordsworth recalls the complex image in Book Four of autobiographical reflection but displaces himself by diffusing the sight of the face amongst a crowd of others. Put differently, the change in 1850 seems both to disclose and to cover over the parallel between the scene of the drowned man (Book Five) and the meditation on self-reflection through time (Book Four), suggesting a certain nervous affiliation between the speaker and the corpse.

In a sense, then, the 1850 *Prelude* contaminates the autobiographical exigency by, belatedly, rendering this exigency as a kind of anticipation of the subject's death. This again recalls de Man's reading, discussed above: for de Man, the future is only ever 'present' in a kind of depressive or unconscious memorialization to which consciousness always arrives late, for "coming-to-consciousness is in arrears vis-à-vis the actual past" (59). Yet, for de Man, there is a sense in which the subject can, ultimately, 'pay off' this

debt. The two, overlapping versions of the ‘same’ moment—with their mutually exclusive expectations of, say, hope or anxiety, autobiography or death—are actually reintegrated through an over-arching program of subject development. Narration comes to the rescue: a diachronic structure eventually places the temporally aberrant trauma into a determinate chronology—thus mitigating its haunting, uncanny force—even if that determination is complex, as in de Man’s sense that the future is ‘present’ only in the midst of memory’s protracted repayment plan. Yet this seems to ignore that the debt levelled by “the actual past” may commit what Wordsworth, above, called “the usury of time,” that the past’s future may demand an exorbitant payment that cannot, in fact, be remitted by consciousness. After all, if the unconscious and irrational are not merely privations of a universal coherence but irreducible aspects of reality, then they must remain unconscious and irrational. In other words, both de Man and Hartman note important discontinuities in Wordsworth’s project; however, both also seem to see those discontinuities reconciled. For de Man, adopting something of an Heideggerian logic, Dasein’s decision to take up its own death—even if this is made difficult by temporal disjunctions—means, ultimately, escaping from an “inauthentic past” into a “reflective and silent world” (55).

Something similar happens with Hartman in his discussion of Wordsworthian prophecy. In *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, Hartman distinguishes between apocalypse and prophecy: where apocalypse marks “at once desire for and dread of the end being hastened,” by contrast “prophecy [...] would seem to be anti-apocalyptic in seeking a ‘future restoration,’ or time for thought” (20; 27). Indeed, such an utterance that gives time for thought would aspire to the traditional figure of philosophy whose “self-image is of serene, poised reflection, in time, but not of it” (Kompridis 53). Or, “more radically still ‘timely utterance’ means an utterance, such as prophecy, or prophetic poetry, which *founds or repairs time*. The prophet utters time in its ambiguity: as the undesired mediation, which prevents fusion, but also destruction” (*Unremarkable* 27, my emphasis). Yet, does this not mistake time for narrative? For what would it mean to “repair” time if time *is* discontinuity, detotalization, or dissemination without return? Indeed, given Hartman’s reading of the word “repair” above, how could timely utterance be purely restorative? Following the logic of the gift, if prophecy gives time this is only

because it takes away certainty, including anything like a comfortable space for reflection and contemplation.

The problem here stems from Hartman's reading of "timely utterance" as the kind of speaking that gives something tangible: "I am tempted, at last to make an assertion and identify the 'timely utterance.' 'Let there be light: and there was light' utters itself in the poet's mind as a proof-text, that is, not only as a deeply subjective wish for the return of the light whose loss was lamented in the first two stanzas, but also as that wish in the form of God's first words, His 'Let there be'" (*Unremarkable* 161). If Hartman, however, takes God's existential fiat to mean "timely utterance" given its claim to radical productivity, he nevertheless overlooks that such an exceptional 'moment'—precisely because it is so exceptional—might begin yet another traumatic cycle, that "let there be" would have to make another cut in time just as it sutures a previous tear in experience. In other words, Hartman and de Man both seem to read Wordsworthian prophecy as, ultimately, restorative, or to agree too quickly that the reflective consciousness, spurred by the spots of time, manages successfully to appropriate the subject's becoming as being—and that this is a goal to be sought after. Such readings overlook that, just as the spots themselves are made possible by trauma, a trauma that must persist given its role as ur-ground, so too is the autobiographical, narrative exigency itself haunted by a death it cannot look at face to face. This is how the existential fiat complicates "timely utterance": *The Prelude* cannot 'face' the trauma at its center because it is itself a preface. As the preface to an exploration of the human mind, the text cannot figure but seems, rather, only able to efface and rewrite itself, generating a traumatic gallery of reflections that arise from both the future and the past.



## CHAPTER THREE

Dismembering History in Percy Shelley's *Hellas*

How am I to explain it, when I am quite certain that I remember forgetting?

—St Augustine, *Confessions*

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

—Shakespeare, *Othello*

Percy Shelley's treatment of prophecy in his little-studied play *Hellas* (1821) proves interesting precisely for how it undercuts anything like a simple relationship between knowledge and history—a relationship already complicated in the *Defence of Poetry* when Shelley assures us that he does not “assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events” (513). Such undercutting is clearest in *Hellas*' disruption of forms of figuration or the operations through which expenditure is typically restricted: specifically, the trope of metaphor and the form of consciousness called memory. For even some of Shelley's best readers seem to think he “view[s] history as eternity's self-alienating lapse from unity, a lapse teleologically forced to return upon itself in an ultimate identity of origin and end, Hellas and Greece,” where “spirit-as-tenor serves,” ultimately, “as the originating ground for history-as-vehicle” (Ulmer 614). *Hellas*, however, resists exactly this kind of closure. Indeed, “*Hellas* cannot sanction critical readings which, reversing the trajectories of displacement, restore the text to history as its determining but occluded truth” (Ulmer 611). This is because historical, contextual material is itself in process throughout the text—something the sequential arrival of messengers, a technique borrowed from Aeschylus' *The Persians*, makes clear.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> In “*Hellas* and the Historical Uncanny” William Ulmer gestures on several occasions toward a radically temporalized reading of *Hellas*. Ultimately, however, he backs away from this possibility, suggesting rather that “history [...] presuppose[s] a linguistic patterning” and that *Hellas* “organiz[es] its historical plot as a tropical extrapolation” (613). That is, while Ulmer's reading complicates the notion that history is *Hellas*'s transcendental signified, nevertheless he re-contains “thought's eternal flight” (783-784) through a particularly synthetic understanding of metaphor as the structure of Shelleyan history: “*Hellas* plots history,” he says, “metaphysically as a dialectical variation of metaphor” (614). In the readings below, I follow Ulmer's suggestion that history is actively and topically formulated in *Hellas*. I disagree, however, that this formulation represents the expression of an historical idea. That is, I disagree with the assertion that *Hellas* “plots worldly events as the antitypes of an other worldly dimension” (613). For this reduces the

The play, in fact, abandons its plot to the unpredictable events immediately contemporary to Shelley, namely, the Greek revolt that erupts in March 1821 against Turkish occupation, 'grounding' its narrative on the shifting sands of this nascent revolution and forcing the text to sustain mutually exclusive possibilities:

*Semichorus I*

If Heaven should resume thee [i.e., Greece],

To Heaven shall her spirit ascend;

*Semichorus II*

If Hell should entomb thee,

To Hell shall her high hearts bend. (102-105)

Shelley's play consists of three scenes, book-ended and separated by visionary interludes, wherein Mahmud, the Turkish ruler residing in Constantinople, hosts various messengers who bring him news concerning the Turkish response to the Greek uprising.<sup>82</sup> In an effort

text to a metaphysical play between essence and appearance when, in fact, for Shelley history's essence *is* appearance. Closer attention reveals that the terms—and times—ostensibly unified by metaphor cannot remain successfully grafted onto each other. That is, the persistent *resistance to metaphor* in the text suspends the 'plotting' Ulmer describes.

Indeed, this is why Ulmer's suggestion that history in *Hellas* becomes uncanny is inadequate. That is, Ulmer reads Mother Earth's metaphysics in *Prometheus Unbound* through the images of dark reflection common in *Hellas*: "The coming age is shadowed on the past/ As on a glass" (805-806). For Ulmer, this becomes a model for history, where time is divided from but haunted by its past, just as the world is divided between an over- and an underground of spirits that reflect one another:

For know, there are two worlds of life and death:

One that which thou beholdest, but the other

Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit

The shadows of all forms that think and live

Till death unite them, and they part no more. (*Prometheus Unbound* 1.191-199)

Because of this dualism, Ulmer, who rightly identifies in Shelley's use of metaphor "the disfiguration rather than recovery of identity in similitude," reads this displacement as putting "history at risk" (618, 617). Hence, rather than entertain the possibility that Shelley might here question Classical metaphysics and historiography—the idea that "narrative unveils the essential laws of history" as "cycles" (Ulmer 617)—Ulmer is motivated to refigure this disfiguration as a kind of uncanny repetition. But as repetition, history's future is reduced to a variation on the past.

<sup>82</sup> Shelley's philhellenism means he valorizes early and small Greek military victories—particularly in the Danubian Principalities—taking these events as the assurance of Greek success:

The moon of Mahomet

Arose, and it shall set,

While blazoned as on Heaven's immortal noon

The cross leads generations on. (221-224)

Yet, the text cannot fully commit to this confident itinerary—something suggested by the fact that these statements emerge most forcefully only in the chaotic miasma of the interludes. Indeed, the Ottomans quickly quashed the Danubian revolts, or what Mahmud calls "the Danube's Day" (294), though they did inspire wider revolt across the Peloponnese followed then by resistance in central Greece. At the time of composition, Shelley would have been moved by some of these early successes. And yet, he must also have

to gain insight concerning the fate of his Empire, Mahmud sends his agent, Hassan, to solicit Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew of Medieval folklore, through whom he solicits the ghost of Mohammed the Second, the famous sultan who captured Constantinople in 1453 and brought an end to the Byzantine Empire. Just as this pattern of summoning figures who, in turn, summon other figures anticipates the rhythms of *The Triumph of Life*—where urgent questions are answered only by new scenes of obscure import—so what Ahasuerus offers is less a stable prediction of the future than the subtraction of any kind of predictability. Ahasuerus’ ‘prophecy’—his is “a life of unconsumed thought which pierces/ The present, and the past, and the to-come” (147-148)—in fact, withdraws knowledge of the future, his incessant wandering symbolizing and anticipating the tread of the “shape all light” in *The Triumph*, whose

feet, no less than the sweet tune

To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot

The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

All that was seemed as if it had been not. (352, 382-385)

Yet, Ahasuerus subtracts certainty precisely to the same degree that he frees history from disabling precedents of all sorts—patterns that lend stability to history but at the expense of fundamental mobility or changeability. Thanks to Ahasuerus, the future Mahmud and Shelley face could be unlike anything that had come before.

The central metaphor in *Hellas*, one that ostensibly ties time together by repeating the past in the present, actually undermines historical continuity and, subsequently, dialectical progressivism. Just as the spectre of Mohamed the Second is about to appear to Mahmud, Ahasuerus remarks,

the Past

Now stands before thee like an Incarnation

Of the To-come. (852-854)

---

had a sense that, once the Greeks had lost the element of surprise, the Revolution’s success would be impossible to determine; his optimism would be tempered, in other words, by Mahmud’s more depressing declaration that “the Greek has paid/ Brief victory with swift loss and long despair” (287-288). Indeed, Shelley seems to be aware that should Turkish reinforcements—“lofty ships” that are “freighted with fire and whirlwind, [that] wait at the Scala” (283, 285) in Phoenicia—manage to elude the small but skilled Greek fleet that, early in the conflict, often out-sailed their enemies, they may well put down the revolution before it could gain any real traction.

Ulmer reads this metaphor as “plotting” history—recalling Locke’s metaphor discussed above in connection to Wordsworth—where the repetition of events stabilizes the present and anticipates the future by incarnating precedents, in this case, elective ancestors, such that the past is, as it were, *meta-phorized*, literally “carried over” into the present and future. However, this reading overlooks the strangeness of this particular figure. If we consider again the structure of the analogy, we see that the past is *like* an incarnation. More specifically, this incarnation is qualified as the kind of incarnation demonstrated or modeled by the “to-come.” This raises the question: what kind of *incarnation* can this possibly be? The to-come is, precisely, not-yet—is possibility as opposed to actuality, or a form of negativity that we might, following Heidegger, call “nullity.” In fact, if the to-come is understood rigorously, it is that which is *always* to-come and thus never really an imminent arrival or presence—or rather, it is *only* an *imminent* arrival, arriving without arrival. Put differently, the ‘figure’ offered to the past in this metaphor is a figure of that which, itself, has no clear figure. To rephrase the metaphor, then, what it says is: the past is incarnated in the same way as the to-come is incarnated, and is about to stand objectively before Mahmud in this form. The irony becomes more palpable when so phrased, as it seems that the quilting point between vehicle and tenor consists in their ‘shared’ absence of body, or in a common dis-figuration or dis-incarnation. At this point, the metaphor’s language of (re)incarnation is completely inverted. So, while Ulmer is right that the “like” in this passage ought to be emphasized, it is not because this analogy simply accomplishes the identity of the past with the future. Rather, we have to pause, in the midst of this intensely telescopic moment, and ask: what does it mean to identify two ‘things’ that, in Schelling’s terms, do not have being—namely, the past and future? How does the operation of synthesis—or metaphor—function when the vehicle and tenor in question are themselves already in a kind of ontological limbo? Is there not something deeply ironic in this ‘identity’ predicated on vacancy?

This ironic figuration or self-blinding prophecy operates not only rhetorically but also phenomenologically in *Hellas* by confusing synthesizing forms of consciousness. For the specific task that Ahasuerus is asked to perform goes beyond mere prediction. That is, Mahmud not only needs his troubled dreams—from which he “wake[s] to weep” (*Triumph* 334) in the opening scene—interpreted; additionally, he needs these dreams, in

the first place, to be *remembered* for him, hence his appeal to Ahasuerus whom he describes as “A Jew, whose spirit is *a chronicle/ Of strange and secret and forgotten things*” (133-134, my emphasis). Describing his situation, Mahmud reflects,

[t]hrice has a gloomy vision hunted me  
 As thus from sleep into the troubled day;  
 It shakes me as the tempest shakes the sea,  
 Leaving no figure upon memory’s glass. (128-131)

Mahmud, then, articulates a complex moment in consciousness, as he seems to have a memory of something forgotten—his soul, like Wordsworth’s, “Remembering how she felt, but what she felt/ Remembering not” (*Prelude* 2.35-6 [1805]). *What* does Mahmud remember when he remembers that he has forgotten? How can he know that there is anything to be remembered at all? For, how can an image leave its trace on the surface of glass? With this problem we might again see *Hellas* anticipating the cadence of Shelley’s later poem, *The Triumph of Life*, where, as Paul de Man notes, “the movement of effacing and of forgetting becomes prevalent in the text and dissolves any illusion of dialectical progress or regress” (98). The action of memory seems, like the action of metaphor, to elude its own regulating action and to suspend the history it might otherwise help to shape as an object for consciousness.

What Mahmud recalls when he remembers his forgotten dream cannot be separated from the very action of forgetting, of bringing back forgetfulness itself, generating what Maurice Blanchot calls “forgetful memory.”<sup>83</sup> Just as Prometheus’ forgotten curse in *Prometheus Unbound* cannot be recalled in the sense of “revoked” without, at the same time, being recalled in the sense of “repeated,” so Mahmud’s memory of forgetfulness threatens to turn memory inside out. Hence, memory, we could

---

<sup>83</sup> In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot reverses the expected trajectories of memory and forgetting in a way that helps to describe their relationship in *Hellas* and other of Shelley’s texts, especially *The Triumph of Life*. Blanchot writes that “forgetting is the primordial divinity, the venerable ancestor and first presence of what, in a later generation, will give rise to Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses. The essence of memory is therefore forgetting; the forgetfulness of which one must drink in order to die” (315). In Blanchot, this powerful, primordial forgetfulness is (dis)figured, somewhat unexpectedly, as an excessive brightness: like Emily in *Epipsychidion* or the “shape all light” in *The Triumph*, the force resistant to figuration is here cast not as deficient but rather as overwhelming—invisible for being *too* visible, the transparency of pure visibility. As Blanchot puts it, “forgetting is the sun: memory gleams through reflection, reflecting forgetting and drawing from this reflection the light—amazement and clarity—of forgetting” (315). Memory here is the temporary *interruption* of pure brightness, is the wrinkle in light caused by reflection, shading, or other variations in intensity.

say, is *dismembered* in every sense of that word: its synthesizing or recuperative action is poisoned by and transformed into what Shelley, in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, describes as “the memory of music fled” (10).<sup>84</sup> Indeed, even prophetic consciousness is infected through this memory. On the surface, prophecy appears to be the most resolute form of historical ordering and discipline, one that masters contingency and time (and, as discussed with Wordsworth and Freud, trauma) by relating to the future *as if the future were already a memory*. In this sense, prophecy is a kind of hyper-memory called on in precisely those moments—such as during violent political revolutions—when consciousness loses its sense of orientation and craves the comforting supplement of historical narrative. Yet, Ahasuerus’ image of prophecy proves remarkably disorienting since it attempts to recuperate order through the ‘figure’ of absence. “Mistake me not!” he says toward the end of the play,

[a]ll is contained in each.

Dodona’s forest to an acorn’s cup

Is that which has been, or will be, to that

Which is—the absent to the present. Thought

Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion,

Reason, Imagination, cannot die. (792-797)<sup>85</sup>

Phrased more starkly, the chiasmus suggests that the past and the future are to the present, what Dodona’s forest is to the acorn. What complicates the analogy, however, is

<sup>84</sup> Again, Blanchot’s comments are germane, for the phenomenology of memory in Blanchot leaves him with a very peculiar experiential residue suggesting that the oscillation between memory and forgetting, while it cannot be grasped objectively, nevertheless leaves something in the wake of its action, if only an obscure sense that consciousness can open to or change into novel, yet unconscious shapes through the generosity of temporality: “I do not know,” writes Blanchot in *The Step Not Beyond*, “but I have the feeling I’m going to have known” (112). How to unpack the dense efficiency of this thought’s temporality? For Blanchot here suggests, like Shelley, that if we ever come to knowledge it is *only* as a “memory of music fled.” For clarity’s sake, the statement could be protracted and rewritten thus: I anticipate a time in the future when I will be able to remember having known something, even as precisely what that something is has faded from memory. Or: I can remember ‘the before’ and ‘the after’ of a memory that has, itself, dissolved, such that the ostensible continuity of experience figures as a strange kind of abridgement, like something is always already missing.

Blanchot’s sense, not that he knows but that he *will have* known, captures remarkably well not only the reader’s experience with *The Triumph of Life* but also the experience of the characters depicted therein, ‘Shelley’ and ‘Rousseau.’ For Blanchot would not say that the text is meaningless—that, in a de Manian idiom, its *performance* as language annihilates its tropological meaning—even as he is willing to entertain a radical negativity or temporality at the heart of experience: the conversation, for Blanchot, does not fall into this silence but is rather infinite, infinitely open to response and to the future.

<sup>85</sup> See Ulmer, pages 618-619, for his reading of this complex, layered analogy.

the implicit relationship between, on the one hand, time's horizons and, on the other, the seed to the full-grown forest. Hence, if we follow its organic, vegetable logic, then the *abundance* that the seed will grow into (namely, Dodona's forests) is analogous to—is identified with—the *absence* of past and future. While the seed implies immanent growth and development, its coordination with presence and absence (the forest identified with absence) suggests that such growth, as a process, cannot be fixed, or perhaps spatialized, by what it branches into. In fact, while the metaphor recalls *The Defence of Poetry* where Dante's poetic language is compared to "the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially" (528), it is also the case that, as Jerrold Hogle points out, we have here not an acorn but only its empty shell,<sup>86</sup> suggesting that the very representative of presence is already curiously inane, like the sky at the end of the Act Three of *Prometheus Unbound*. Once again, prophecy proves to give with one hand while it takes with the other. For the reference to Dodona's forests—the location of Zeus' oracle—makes the analogy itself, its aporetic structure, an image of prophecy,<sup>87</sup> though an image that necessarily dissolves in and through its formation as an image, just as memory has become identical to the rhythm of forgetting. The nature of the relationship, after all, implies the growth of emptiness, leaving us only, as the acorn's husk, the process of growth itself—a process severed from a substantial body.

This inversion of prophecy helps to explain why Ahasuerus is in effect dismissed in the same moment that he arrives at Mahmud's court. That is, before Ahasuerus can offer any kind of help to Mahmud, the latter asserts

but the unborn hour,  
Cradled in fear and hope, conflicting storms,  
Who shall unveil? Nor thou, nor I, nor any  
Mighty or wise. I apprehend not  
What thou has taught me, but now perceive  
That thou art no interpreter of dreams;  
Thou dost not own that art, device, or God,

---

<sup>86</sup> "In itself the eternal repository of this thought-transition is empty—the 'acorn's cup' without the seed—because the germ it receives and then sends ahead is in motion from a parent-form toward a future reincarnation. This 'cup,' in other words, is constant in being no more than a drive or facilitator turning what recedes toward a different repetition of a previous form" (Hogle 290).

<sup>87</sup> "The oracle at Dodona is regarded by ancient writers as the first prophetic centre" (Morrison 96).

Can make the future present. (752-759)

In fact, even after Ahasuerus manages to offer some commentary on the revolution and Mahmud's dream<sup>88</sup> his words, according to Mahmud, rather than illuminating his mind, "cast on all things surest, brightest, best,/ Doubt, insecurity, astonishment" (790-791). With an impetuosity anticipating Asia's frustration with Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound*, who responds to her passionate questions concerning the benevolence of God with a cryptic "He reigns" (2.4.28), Mahmud finally appeals to other agents for information he hopes will be more satisfying.

As Ulmer suggests, Shelley's *Hellas* says more about historicization as an activity than about history as something objectively present.<sup>89</sup> The play even seems less directly to represent its historical moment than to translate the re-formative energy of political revolt into a literary form, or better, a style of composition. In this sense, then, *Hellas* is 'pre-historic,' though in an affirmative as opposed to deficient sense. Indeed, since Shelley aims to represent not "history" but the unruly temporality that forms a pre-sense of the historical, he translates poetry and consciousness's synthetic resources into analytic, dismembering forces. Active becoming can, subsequently, 'figure' only *pre-figuratively*, where that term designates not so much an anticipatory sign as something not-yet-figured and perhaps resolutely unfigurable. History here is unfigurable, in other words, because it has been displaced by a technique. The inversion within metaphor, memory, and prophecy throughout the text does not render history unreadable by casting history as blindness—something close to de Man's conclusions in his reading of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*. Rather, Shelley effectively frees history from binding determinations, renders forward thinking or *pro-metheus* unbound. By explicitly obscuring the future's eventual shape, the text in fact *opens* history to a novel sense of futurity. For, to recall Koselleck's remarks in chapter one, in Romanticism "there occurs

---

<sup>88</sup> Ahasuerus seems to refer to *both* the war and the dream when he describes how  
 this Whole  
 Of suns and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers  
 With all the silent or tempestuous workings  
 By which they have been, are, or cease to be,  
 Is but a vision—all that it inherits  
 Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams. (776-781)

<sup>89</sup> "Shelley devotes *Hellas* to historicizing the present by narratively appropriating it [i.e., the present]" (Ulmer 612).



a temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history, at the end of which there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity,” what he will also call the “*frühen Neuzeit*—the period in which modernity is formed” (5). That is, Shelley’s text expresses something not about the content of the future, but about how a new *concept of the future* might emerge, one that embraces the negating power of temporality rather than indulging in the kind of “apocalyptic prophecy [that] destroys time through its fixation on the End” (Koselleck 14).

Shelley’s strange treatment of figuration in *Hellas* stems from his thinking about language’s relationship to thought more generally. In *Speculations on Metaphysics*, Shelley argues that words are not identical to thought. In fact, words conceal as much as they disclose: “Logic, or the science of words must no longer be confounded with metaphysics or the science of facts. Words are the instruments of mind whose capacities it becomes the Metaphysician accurately to know, but they are not mind, nor are they portions of mind” (7.63). Indeed, even if Asia in *Prometheus Unbound* says that Prometheus “gave man speech, and speech created thought” (2.4.73), this still maintains a difference between the two realms even as it raises difficult questions of priority and causation.<sup>90</sup> Hence, early in the *Defence*, Shelley sounds positively skeptical, arguing that words—thought’s mediator and veil—have no essential, natural, or motivated relationship to ideas. Echoing Locke he asserts, “language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone” (513). Nevertheless, Shelley grants *poetic* language, language that is “vitaly metaphorical,” a power his metaphysics denies in that such language, he says, “marks the before unapprehended relations of *things*” (512, my emphasis). This language somehow manages to articulate the relationship between language and non-language; with a kind of enthusiasm, this language manages to put into linguistic terms a relation that really exists *outside* of language. It can do this, however, only if it maintains the very split it is supposed to suture. Like Kantian purposiveness (without purpose) or the Sign of History—other attempts to relate without positively linking human understanding to things in themselves—the identification of language and thought through metaphor cannot be completed and must remain suspended in its active

<sup>90</sup> Complicating the causal relationship between words and thoughts is the fact that the name “Prometheus” can mean “forward thinking.” So, if speech creates thoughts, the agent responsible for this speech is *named* thought, suggesting that thought creates the words that create thought.

*meta-phora*. Without such suspension, one falls into Kant's transcendental illusion or what Shelley might describe as dead metaphor: language forgetful of its arbitrariness and purely internal, self-relation. Hence, Shelley's metaphors must always remain on the move, must always wander away from perfect synthesis or undermine their own totalizing action. This language must always remember the wound between ideas and words. That is, even if poetic language is supposed to break from merely tropical orbiting, it cannot perfectly coincide with thought. Poetry, rather, invites an infinite conversation. Like phenomenal appearances in Kant, the figuration of thought through language both gestures toward and yet denies access to thought in itself.

This problem of linguistic figuration is allegorized in Shelley's treatment of the Wandering Jew. This treatment takes place across a range of texts, linking *Hellas'* Ahasuerus and his displacement of synthesis to a larger, phenomenological motif that runs through several of Shelley's works. For instance, in 1810 Shelley composes *The Wandering Jew; Or, the Victim of the Eternal Avenger*, introducing a character that will resurface throughout much of his work, with *Hellas* marking his final explicit appearance. According to the Medieval folkloric tradition, the Wandering Jew is cursed to roam the earth until the Second Coming for taunting Jesus during the Passion. Recalling the story of Cain, God marks the Jew on the face. This disfigured figure thus plays a complex role in Shelley's thinking about prophetic mediation. For if the Jew's body bears God's wounding mark, then he becomes in effect the sign of God—something like Blake's "Divine Revelation in the Litteral expression" (*Milton* 49.15). Shelley's Jew, then, embodies poetry's vital metaphoricity for being forced—to recall Mathew Arnold's germane phrase—to wander "between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born," that is, between a past and a future that 'resemble' each other only through their shared non-being. While the Jew's life is coextensive with Christian history, he lives as a counterhistory to the ideology of progress and even as a countertrope to the logic of hermeneutic synthesis. For he reveals on his own flesh, to adapt Benjamin's famous words, that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (*Illuminations* 256); through the Jew, Shelley finds a powerful expression of the tyranny, violence, and regression within ostensible progress. In fact, in *The Wandering Jew*, the protagonist—named here Paulo—is *unable* to narrate his own

story: while he represents the quilting point between particular and universal history, he suffers from a remarkable narrative deficit that emerges through a self-interrupting use of language. If the Jew is supposed literally to embody writing, if his wandering is a performance of *meta-phora* incarnate or a kind of allegory of writing, he walks toward the kind of open, dis-incarnated future to-come described through Mohamed the Second's ghost. Despite the attempt to make metaphor suddenly literal through the Jew's body, the endlessness of his wandering, like the fragile texture of his autobiography, tends in fact once again to ex-*pose* synthesis.

For instance, before the optics of dissolution encountered in *Hellas* and familiar in *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley has already identified the prophet's vision as less a mode of insight than a form of blindness. That is, typically, prophetic vision—like Wordsworth's "loud prophetic blast of harmony" (*Prelude* 5.96)—attempts to organize disparate elements into a whole that is, in every way, *sensible*. In fact, *vision* becomes *visionary* when, like Kant's enthusiast, feelings project themselves into the supersensible: a seer makes the insensible or non-sensible meaningful not through a sixth sense but rather through an enhancement of his sensorium that makes his natural senses supernaturally sensitive. In Shelley, vision specifically is connected with knowledge and self-knowledge. In his discussion of Classical drama in the *Defence*, for instance, he remarks, [n]either the eye nor mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall. (520)

Ironically, then, when the main characters in *The Wandering Jew*, Paulo and Rosa, first meet in a complex scene of mutual seeing, vision becomes indistinct. This episode takes place shortly after Paulo, the Wandering Jew, rescues Rosa, a nun, from a convent in Padua. Recalling Agnes' imprisonment in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, the text suggests that Rosa is about to be punished by a brutal Abbess for indiscretions that remain unnamed. In fact, the language and imagery in the scene suggests that the Abbess is on

the verge of committing human sacrifice. Rosa, “fainting” (1.147), is born to “the fatal shrine” (1.183) by a group of nuns amidst a crowd whose “confused and open clamors” (1.176)—again, recalling the vigilante crowd in *The Monk*—suggest strong opposition to the proceedings. Given her name, it seems additionally inauspicious that “The roses from [Rosa’s] cheek are fled/ But there the lily reigns instead” (1.148-149) and that she should be carried over a path of “fresh roses strew[n] upon the ground” (1.163). Paulo, observing the scene, witnesses Rosa’s sudden dash for the doors and, quickly navigating the crowd, manages to intercept her and bear her off just as she loses consciousness.

Hence, the first meeting proper between Paulo and Rosa occurs when she awakes from this trance—as if waking from the dead. In a gesture characteristic of Shelley’s later work, where, as William Keach notes, Shelley’s reflexive imagery courts a kind of tautology that proves more confusing than coherent,<sup>91</sup> Paulo’s gaze at this moment seems to interrupt Rosa’s own, slowly returning vision:

Rising from her death-like trance,  
Fair Rosa met the stranger’s glance;  
She started from his chilling gaze,  
Wild it was as the tempest’s blaze,  
It shot a lurid gleam of light. (1.238-243)

This is a strangely self-baffling image of vision. Not only is the gaze described as both “chilling” and a “blaze,” the sense of awakening—of emerging from a trance—is met with a scene that is hardly less perplexing. Even the light itself, rather than illuminating anything, is “lurid,” recalling an earlier image within the church whence Rosa fled with Paulo: an image that describes how light penetrated the “saint-cipher’d panes” and “tinged the pillars with varied stains” (1.91, 93). Like Paulo’s “glance”—suggesting not only a look but a kind of deflection, a delicately redirecting touch—the lurid light emerges through swaddling mists, a mere “gleam.”<sup>92</sup> Crucially, this image of gazing has the same effect on Rosa as it does on Shelley’s ostensibly synthesizing tropes. That is, this image of mortifying vision inspires a simile that seems, structurally, suddenly to

<sup>91</sup> See especially pages 75-78 for Keach’s subtle analysis of how the “indeterminacy in Shelley’s similes [in *Prometheus Unbound*] doubles the stylistic process of drawing together ‘external actions’ and ‘operations of the human mind’ into a perceptual continuum” (78).

<sup>92</sup> According to the OED, “Gleam” (v.<sup>1</sup> *intr.*) can mean, “to shine either with emitted or reflected light; in mod. use chiefly, to shine with a brightness subdued by distance or an intervening medium.”

swoon, abandoning its clarifying momentum in a Blakean “paralytic stroke” (*Urizen* 19.46). Continuing the picture of Paulo’s eye, the narrator begins to offer a simile only to abandon the trope before the antecedent “As” can meet the corresponding “So”:

A secret spell of sudden dread,  
 A mystic, strange, and harrowing fear,  
 As when the spirits of the dead,  
 Drest in ideal shapes appear,  
 And hideous glance on human sight—  
 Scarce could Rosa’s frame sustain,  
 The chill that pressed upon her brain. (1.243-249)

Shelley here seems like he is about to offer an image of vision only to offer, instead, a scene of the failure of the image. And yet, this blindness proves residually illuminating in that it *performs* the psychological turmoil responsible for Rosa’s fainting spell and anticipates the narrative disconnect Shelley inserts toward the end of the fourth canto (4.370) in place of a direct description of Rosa’s death.

Just as the vital metaphoricity of poetic language gains privileged access to a world veiled by language insofar as this metaphor defamiliarizes or disfigures “dead” (512), ossified terms and perceptions, so the Wandering Jew’s incessant movement embodies and acts out, as it were, such estrangement. Indeed, his gaze is similarly disorienting or even blinding but not only because it terrifies Rosa. Rather, Paulo and Ahasuerus’ gazes seem routinely to see nothing: “why did he [i.e., Paulo] gaze on vacancy,/ As if some strange form was near?” (2.97). And yet, this vision of nothing does not resolve into something static or present; rather, the vision of invisibility—like the memory of forgetfulness—infests vision *with* invisibility, or turns seeing *into* blindness. For instance, Paulo makes claims for a superior kind of vision, characteristic of conventional expectations concerning prophetic “seers”:

I pierce with intellectual eye,  
 Into each hidden mystery;  
 I penetrate the fertile womb  
 Of nature; I produce to light  
 The secrets of the teeming earth,

And give air's unseen embryos birth:  
 The past, the present, and to come,  
 Float in review before my sight. (3.232-239)

This power—its language echoed in Ahasuerus' words in *Hellas*, noted above—however, is radically mitigated by Paulo's difficulty in facing his own history when he attempts to narrate his life to Rosa and his only friend, Victorio<sup>93</sup>:

At this short retrospect I faint:  
 Scarce beats my pulse—I lose my breath,  
 I sicken even unto death  
 Oh! hard would be the task to paint  
 And gift with life past scenes again;  
 To knit a long and linkless chain,  
 Or strive minutely to relate  
 The varied horrors of my fate. (3.431-438)

As if reversing positions with Rosa or taking up her earlier vision of his gaze, Paulo swoons when he encounters his own history and the prospect of its figuration. The “long and linkless chain,” like a temporal version of Prometheus' shackles or a metaphor anticipating the chained train of historical figures displayed in *The Triumph*, seems to bind and, for being a narrative he cannot bear to form, unbind Paulo—to submit him to a history of inescapable violence and yet to hint that such a seemingly interminable suffering eludes teleological closure.

\* \* \*

Paulo's enhanced vision reaches its limit when it comes to autobiography, for this would ask him reflexively to figure disfiguration as such. Indeed, just as Enlightenment

---

<sup>93</sup> Victorio is introduced at the beginning of Canto 2. For reasons that remain unclear, Victorio abandons his “Illustrious [...] name” (2.44) to follow Paulo. Ultimately, however, he betrays Paulo not only by seducing but also accidentally killing Rosa. Recalling the plot in *Romeo and Juliet*, Victorio aims to create the impression that Rosa has died so that he can kidnap her without incurring Paulo's wrath. To accomplish this Victorio relies on a potion concocted by a Witch. Victorio expects the potion only to mimic death. The Witch, however—acting through Satan's influence—gives Victorio a potion that is in fact lethal. Hence, while Paulo successfully rejects Satan's Faustian proposal in Canto 3, Satan seem to circumvent Paulo's resolve by killing Rosa and alienating Victorio.

history cannot perform a history of itself, cannot understand its own way of knowing as a necessary consequence of a particular shape of (un)consciousness, so any static image of Paulo's own life seem to elude and collapse vision. Yet, if Paulo cannot figure his history, his history actively disfigures him, gesturing through this very resistance to figuration toward a realm beyond all figuration—but one that cannot be tailored to the metaphysics of presence. In this sense, we are close to Paul de Man's conception of the text as a kind of double, self-conflicting phenomenon that premises its meaningfulness on an act of positing that is radically meaningless. Indeed, while de Man's legacy has in recent years experienced its own sort of defacement, his thought is worth reconsidering—while acknowledging its specific limitations—as his approach to poetic language opens a way to re-conceptualizing Shelley's relationship to history in terms of prophecy as detotalization.

De Man treats figuration as an existential process, where anthropomorphism is rigorously distinguished from tropes like metaphor, prosopopeia, and metonymy. Anthropomorphism expresses the positional power of language.<sup>94</sup> Forming into the human is understood as existential creation—'making human' in the sense of creating the human. This act of creation is anterior to meaning and is too abrupt, immediately expressive, or performative to be contained in the circuit of tropic signification. Metaphor, contrastingly, structures the way that meaning—the tropological, rhetorical side of language—circulates; it is precisely what fails to acknowledge, or veils, the existential positing of language, language as positional and contingent.<sup>95</sup> Hence, de Man's readings seem inevitably to repeat a reciprocal re-veiling: "language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood" (*Rhetoric* 97). As Chase summarizes,

---

<sup>94</sup> In "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," de Man explains that "'anthropomorphism' is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance. It takes one entity for another and thus implies the constitution of specific entities prior to their confusion, the *taking* of something for something else that can then be assumed to be *given*. Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others" (241).

<sup>95</sup> As Cynthia Chase puts it, "[t]he deictic function of language [...] itself involves a conflict between the function of language as postulation or act and its function as figure or representation. [...]. Once the representational function of language is seen to take place by means of figure—by the assumed and imposed resemblances, the 'aberrant totalizations' of metaphor—language has to be conceived not only as representation, cognition, or constatation, but also act. Predication entails not simply knowing, *erkennen*, but positing, *setzen*" (89).

“predication involves the necessary but impossible combination of these two functions: the *positing* of a *relationship*. To posit a relationship, de Man implies, is a contradiction in terms, since to posit or to postulate implies an arbitrary act not determined by any existing relationships, which sets up what had no previous existence, no relationship with other existing things” (90). One of these two dimensions can, then, figure—in the sense of emerging as something distinct—only through the temporary suppression of the other: “language functions as the representation of meaning only in blotting out the positing power that enables it to act as language” (Chase 94).

De Man’s methodology, resembling in part Shelley’s insistence on language’s self-reference, could be described as a kind of philology, taking the literary artwork as a strictly textual object always uncomfortably positioned between meaning and being. From this perspective, reading always remains divided between language’s representational meaning and its existential performance: what language does is not what it means and any close analysis of the latter will necessarily detotalize itself as it approaches an insight about its own being. Any critical reading would, then, have to suspend the closure of its own hermeneutic claims—claims made within the same topological circuit as the text’s own meanings—since the performance of language always simultaneously dislocates or renders radically provisional whatever meaningful relationships might emerge. Hence, every reading becomes an *allegory* of reading, in the specifically Benjaminian sense of that term. That is, for Benjamin, allegory does not mean a simple transposition of ideas, the hypertext, into a particular dramatic expression or particular hypotext. Rather, Benjamin compares allegory to melancholy, where the former becomes the latter when it searches endlessly for its lost origin of pre-symbolic plenitude. Hence, in de Man’s formulation, “whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (*Rhetoric* 210). Allegory, taken in this particularly fragmented sense, describes the nature of the relationship between the meaningful, constative side of texts and the performative, positing action of those ‘same’ texts. This is not, indeed, to say that the performative aspect of language—language’s ‘being’—is, for de Man, some kind of presence, or that, as Rodolphe Gasché points out,



that textual performance is not subject to the same kind of displacement to which it subjects tropes.<sup>96</sup> Rather, it seems closer to the volatility, described in chapter one, of irony, which is itself a kind of temporality. What this concept of reading leads toward, then, is not a transcendent signified—not some ultimate system or unity that, as in New Criticism, reconciled paradoxes in the name of some kind of aesthetic satisfaction.

Rather, as Geoffrey Hartman argues in “Looking Back on Paul de Man,”

[w]hat reading produces [for de Man] is not so much a replica or restitution of “inner experience,” as something more akin to vertigo than to understanding [recalling de Man’s suggestion in *The Rhetoric of Temporality* that irony is always the irony of understanding]. The sense of vertigo had been associated in *Blindness and Insight* with the discovery of temporality: the sense of time as a process without synthesis, repetitive, unreconciling, leading to death rather than to a recognition of permanence, and therefore no more ‘authentic’ than the more naïve state it demystifies.

(9)

For de Man, any form of reading that aims to clarify or to explain a text’s meaning necessarily reaches the apex of its insights in a moment of blindness, in that the very systematic intricacy and nuance of hermeneutic operations imposes a totality on a medium that must, in its performative aspect, undo or at least render fundamentally provisional these same totalizations.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> In the opening chapter of *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man*, Gasché illustrates how de Man employs terms from speech act theory in order to expose the implicit, awkward attempt by plain language philosophy to confront the old problem of linguistic reflexivity so important in Romanticism. Beyond this revelation, de Man aims to displace the totalizing efforts of absolute thought through a concept of deconstruction as rigorous rereading, necessitated by the self-conflicting tensions within all texts between their performance and their content. This oscillation between meaning and performance specifically cannot be resolved: if de Man dismantles “the totalizing specular configurations” of tropes, he equally insists that “there cannot be a new totalization on the basis of the concept of language as action” (37, 36).

<sup>97</sup> For instance, near the beginning of *Blindness and Insight*, de Man describes how all of the critics he studies in the subsequent text illustrate a kind of radical blindness. This is not for any kind of deficiency of thought or lack of rigor on the part of the figures under analysis; rather, it is because of a deep paradox in the nature of the relationship between linguistic meaning and linguistic performance, where the refinement of the former depends on the repression of the latter. This is why, as Gasché explains, de Man’s deconstruction renders readings of texts themselves unreadable: “if to read is to understand a text and if to understand means thematically, aesthetically, or conceptually to totalize a text, then the production of insights into the mechanics of the text will certainly render that text opaque and unreadable” (23). Hence, a rhetorical reading will always suspend its own authority and will, itself, always have to be reread. Again, this perpetual displacement of reading gestures toward allegories of reading in that reading itself becomes allegorical or self-dislocating—or perhaps, *critical*. Deconstruction then “takes place as an endless

So, the very totalization constitutive of meaning amounts to a repression of the process through which that meaning can be formulated, such that an insight is coextensive with a certain kind of blindness. Just as the vision of the Wandering Jew (both the vision he *has* and the picture *of* him) becomes disfigured at the very moment of vision's reflexive self-looking, or in a prophetic mode that purports to be a form of privileged, *visionary* insight, so "theory," as "seeing," becomes for de Man indistinguishable from blindness: theory *becomes* the *resistance to* theory.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the Wandering Jew exposes history as a version of blindness in de Man's sense, in that for both "history is not *temporal*" insofar as it "maintains the myth, for example, of [...] dialectical relation" ("Looking" 7) as a progressive *Bildung*: an error of seeing that is itself revealed as an error by Ahasuerus and Paulo's non-predictive prophecy.

Shelley seems committed to a division between linguistic meaning and being that can only be suspended through a literary style based on the measured and deliberate dissolution of the very mechanisms of synthesis—metaphor, simile, memory, prophecy, history, and the life of the Wandering Jew himself—that de Man, similarly, would see as agents of insight's blindness. Shelley, however, in contrast to de Man, highlights rather than diminishes the affective dimension of this suspension. Indeed, as Hartman notes, "de Man's eloquence concerning [the] vertigo [induced by time's disfiguring force] is unsettling in a critic who renounces affect" (9). This disinterestedness—something that

---

process—there are deconstructions to the second, third, and so forth, degree—paradoxically, because [such readings, despite their negativity, necessarily] relapse into the thematic" (Gasché 26), something Rajan notes concerning de Man's own 'reading' of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*: "for one thing, de Man (as he would be the first to admit) *has* provided a 'reading,' by making form take the place of a vanishing content through a hypostasis of the poem's method" (*Supplement* 326). De Man's unusual approach to *The Triumph* "sees the diegetic level of the text as preempting all attempts to approach it thematically. All interpretations of the poem hitherto have assumed that it 'says' something, that it has a content other than the process of its own language" (*Supplement* 325). That is, de Man sees critical readings of Shelley's text as begging the question rather in the same way as 'Shelley' and 'Rousseau' beg the question within the poem: they imply, with every inquiry after stable origins and meaning, that there *is* a stable origin and meaning, just as the critics who attempt to perform either archaeological re-membering or some form of hermeneutic analysis presuppose the text's basic coherence. And yet, de Man's realization of this is itself an insight that might totalize the text. Hence, de Man's reading practice could take as its motto Othello's ostensible tautology—"put out the light, and then put out the light." Insight is a blindness that must be illuminated even as that illumination itself another kind of blindness.

<sup>98</sup> As Wald Godzich explains in the preface to *Resistance to Theory*, "etymologically, the term [i.e., 'theory'] comes from the Greek verb *theorein*, to look at, to contemplate, to survey" (xiv). This is, further, not observation in the sense of mere intuition, *aesthesis*, but rather observation by an authority.

becomes, in Neil Hertz's reading, nearly perverse<sup>99</sup>—stems from de Man's sense of the subject as the product of a basically mechanical, linguistic operation. The self is the ostensible ground of autobiography. For de Man, however, this self is a fiction created through the reflexive action of auto-bio-graphy such that this genre's claims to a 'deeper' coherence or unity amount to a distortion of its true provenance. In other words, the operation that *produces* the subject cannot be permanently divided from the realization that the subject is indeed produced rather than merely discovered. The process of production so exposed necessarily displaces any appeal to concepts like authentic subjectivity or the real self. Hence, autobiography performs a double gesture: on one hand, it gives a face to the self, in the sense of forming the being—such as it is—of the self, performing the action of self-making. On the other hand and in the same stroke, this self-generation displaces any claims that that image might make to a transcendent essence. In other words, autobiography puts the "face," as the foundation of a narrative of development, under erasure or identifies autobiography with defacement: it 'marks' the face as a way to reveal the self as the fiction it is and to disrupt (or vitalize in Shelley's sense) the tendency for this process to be mistaken for a stable substance. As de Man says, "despite the perfect closure of the system, the text contains elements that not only disrupt its balance but its principle of production" (76). Hence, a text like de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement" seems especially germane to a reading of Shelley's *Wandering Jew*, whose autobiography is literally a history of his own defacement. That is, the *Wandering Jew* would seem to be the exemplary figure for de Man's thesis about the self-effacing nature of autobiography—something encountered in the preceding chapter when, reading between the 1805 and 1850 *Prelude*, Wordsworth's autobiographical exigency overlaps with the image of the drowned swimmer. Why, then,

---

<sup>99</sup> "De Man would have us register this pathos but not be quite taken in by it: hence the parenthetical warning not to confuse ontology and psychoanalysis. But, like the admonition to "avoid the pathos of an imagery of bodily mutilation" we began by noticing in [de Man's] Kleist essay, this warning is hard to heed: at best—and this is, if not de Man's point in issuing such warnings, at least one consequence of our reading of them—we can acknowledge the "predicament" they place us in. That is, we can acknowledge that a tug-of-war between "analytic rigor" and "poetic persuasion" is unavoidable in each act of reading/writing—in Yeats's, in de Man's, in our own—and acknowledge it all the more readily when the felt pressure of some other reader's pathos, here [i.e., in a passage from de Man's dissertation] the imposition of the words "matricidal indifference," seems at once so palpable and so gratuitous" (Hertz 91).

does de Man completely ignore this character, one so prominent in Shelley's work? A response to this question requires a closer look at de Man's treatment of tropes.

In de Man's conception of subjectivity, reflexive figuration—the moment when one would think that the most stable synthesis is established, a kind of perfect self-consciousness—is the same moment that the subject is displaced and figurative action is interrupted. To illustrate his point, de Man turns to Wordsworth—an exemplary Romantic autobiographer. For it seems that Wordsworth finds the tools of self-fashioning—words and metaphors—always to solicit the death of the figure they putatively help to formulate. De Man recalls Wordsworth's comments in his third essay on epitaphs:

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had the power to consume and alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (2.84-85)

For Wordsworth, if words are—as Shelley would have it—representations of thought and not thought incarnate, then they are not merely misleading but positively mortifying. Yet, the conditional “if” in Wordsworth's essay inserts an essential ambivalence into the passage. On one hand, it suggests that Wordsworth believes words are indeed incarnations of thought, that thoughts and words together form the tissue of consciousness and that he is merely imagining the unhappy epistemological situation that would follow were that not the case. On the other hand, this protracted surmise, coupled with an “if” that suspends any perfectly clear determination of Wordsworth's position on the issue, suggests that, once again, he is making a declaration in an interrogative form, that he is *hoping for* what he *asserts to be* the case. It is through this oscillation that de

Man illustrates his concept of autobiography as defacement. In fact, he locates this oscillation in a single verb in Wordsworth's poetry, the word "hang."

De Man points out that Wordsworth focuses on this word in this 1815 "Preface," describing there the "mind in its activity" (31) when confronted with Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton's metaphorical usage of the word "hang," in effect making the word, by a kind of allusive metonymy, *the figure of metaphor (or figuration) itself*. He then turns to some instances from *The Prelude* where "hang" and other forms of the same verb seem to be overdetermined and, specifically, to gesture toward death. In "Wordsworth and Hölderlin," de Man cites Book Five of *The Prelude* where the boy of Winander "hung/ Listening," foreshadowing his own grave in a churchyard that "hangs/ Upon a Slope above the Village School." In fact, with this last image, Wordsworth seems quite specifically to echo Shakespeare's image of plants on the cliffs of Dover, cited in the 1815 "Preface," from *King Lear*: "half way down/ Hangs one who gathers samphire" (31, Wordsworth's emphasis).<sup>100</sup> This similarity is important because, de Man argues, if Wordsworth uses the verb "hang" as the *example of metaphor* in the 1815 "Preface" he does something rather disturbing when, in his poetry, "his own use of 'hangs' [...] in many key passages reveals [...] a remarkably consistent pattern" (*Rhetoric* 88-89) of invoking mortality. In other words, "hang" is a word that is supposed to be the exemplary figure of figuration for Wordsworth. Yet, at the same time it is always, in his poetry, imminently mortifying or threatening to disfigure the human. The ambivalence surrounding Wordsworth's use of the word "hang" as a figuring and disfiguring term echoes the ambiguity concerning the relationship between words and thought: it is possible that words—the pre-eminent tools of figuration—could be the agents of death if it turns out that their relationship to ideas does not follow the model of incarnation.

This sheds some light on de Man's treatment of autobiography. His point is, again, that the very action of (topical) figuration is indistinguishable from the action of disfiguration (since this figuration totalizes and therefore misrepresents the performative fiat). But if de Man can place added stress on Wordsworth's figure for (dis)figuration (i.e., "hang"), what happens if we do the same to de Man's own figure for tropes? In

---

<sup>100</sup> A slight misquotation: Edgar says, in fact, "Half-way down/ Hangs one *that* gathers samphire" (4.6.15-16, my emphasis).

describing the reciprocally constitutive relationship between fiction and ‘reality’ in autobiography—an action that, as noted above, suspends any appeal to authentic being and is therefore (dis)figuring—de Man borrows an image from Gérard Genette who describes the relation as a kind of “*tourniquet*” (in *Rhetoric* 70). Rather than a dialectic between a real person and his or her semi-fictional text, “the autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution” (*Rhetoric* 70). De Man comments on this situation that, “as anyone who as ever been in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable” (*Rhetoric* 70). In other words, de Man’s figure for the kind of self-reflection performed in autobiography is a revolving door. More specifically, the revolving door is the figure for the exemplary trope of autobiography, prosopopeia: “prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name [...] is made as intelligible and memorable as a face” (*Rhetoric* 76). Yet, there is something discordant in this set of parallel figures of (re)turning. Prosopopeia is the exemplarily trope of autobiography. The revolving door is the exemplary trope of tropes. The trope of tropes (i.e., the revolving door) is, then, used as a metaphor for the action of autobiography, or prosopopeia. Hence, the revolving door is an image of prosopopeia. What is odd is that this turns an action of personification—an action that is eminently human and humanizing—into a purely mechanical operation. Given that de Man would rigorously distinguish between trope and anthropomorphism, this does not cause a problem. However, it seems rather difficult to ignore that prosopopeia inevitably shades into anthropomorphism as both are eminently humanizing operations.

Hence, the image of a revolving door does not merely displace the notion of dialectical progress with an endless turning reminiscent of Romantic irony. It also suggests a kind of dehumanization given its industrial smoothness, this stainless steel finish that bears no permanent, organic traces—just like the work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility. For this is an image of stark anonymity: a door designed to lubricate high traffic areas or to facilitate the swarm of workers or shoppers entering and exiting generic spaces. In fact, a “revolving door” does not merely suggest indifference or an absence of qualitative change when used, rhetorically, to describe a form of

participation or interaction. Beyond this, it *literally* makes people into cogs in a wheel. In short, de Man seems to have made the operation of humanization—of human self-figuration and autobiography—or prosopopeia itself identical with the relentless turning of indifferent and “dark Satanic Mills” (*Milton* 1.8).

The most humanizing narrative form, biography, winds up being understood as the displacement of what is, at root, a totally inhuman or at least non-human action. Indeed, de Man’s surprising claim, in the final lines of “Autobiography as De-Facement,” that “death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament” (*Rhetoric* 81), testifies to this strange subordination of consciousness and life to language.<sup>101</sup> So, to make a reply to the question posed above—why does de Man ignore what would seem to be an exemplary instance of autobiography as defacement, Shelley’s Wandering Jew?—one answer might be that Shelley’s defaced figure of autobiography and of history as such is an irreducibly and explicitly corporeal being. The Jew is a character that cannot be separated from his suffering even as he embodies and performs acts of writing; the Jew is a kind of allegory *of* writing. Rather than reducing human consciousness and self-reflection to linguistic operations, Shelley’s various treatments of the Wandering Jew infuse history and writing with irreducibly affective and biological dimensions. Hence, Jean-Luc Nancy’s discussion of the image may offer a useful corrective to de Man’s analysis of figuration. That is, Nancy unfolds figuration’s wider, phenomenological dimensions in that the image cannot be separated from desire, affect, and even the drama of sacrifice—in Batillian terms—as a way of rendering the mundane sacred: “the image is desirable or it is not an image” (*Ground* 6).

As Nancy argues, the image is not merely a kind of appearance but a force that includes an element that withdraws from figuration and generates, with this retreat, the

---

<sup>101</sup> As noted in chapter one, Blanchot is interested in a similar kind of tension but considers the play between meaning and being in broader phenomenological and existential terms. In fact, if de Man will reduce human life and death to a linguistic operation, Blanchot will stress how linguistic operations are in fact intimately related to human existence, as if to promote language to the status of sentient being rather than demote sentient being to the status of linguistic mechanisms. For in Blanchot’s analysis, language in a sense ‘kills’ the things it would name by replacing their substantiality with a mere sign. Blanchot will admit that this notion of linguistic murder seems a bit dramatic and qualify his point: ‘to kill’ must be taken essentially as ‘to limit.’ And yet, the stakes introduced by the language of life and death still resonate here in that this limitation can only obtain in the case of truly finite things. There is a sense that the word—that language—is thus not so much a killer as the emissary of death, a reminder that whatever it names is finite. See Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death” in *The Work of Fire*.

opaque, seductive relation of fascination: “the distinct,” or the distinction through which the image distinguishes itself from the background of continuous, homogenous things, stands apart from the world of things considered as a world of availability. In this world, all things are available for use, according to their manifestation. What is withdrawn from this world has no use, or has a completely different use, and is not presented in a manifestation (a force is precisely not a form: here it is also a question of grasping how the image is not a form [or figure] and is not formal [or, perhaps, not figural]). It is what does not show itself but rather gathers itself into itself, the taut force on this side of forms or beyond them, but not as another obscure form: rather as the other of forms. It is the intimate and its passion, distinct from all representation. It is a matter, then, of grasping the passion of the image, the power of its stigma or of its distraction (hence, no doubt, all the ambiguity and ambivalence that we attach to images, which throughout our culture, and not only in its religions, are said to be both frivolous and holy). (*Ground 2-3*)

The image for Nancy is like de Man’s topological figures in that both emerge as *meaningful* units by distancing themselves from sheer being. And yet, while de Man will see this in terms of an opposition that remain *internal to* language—between linguistic meaning and performance, between trope and pure expressiveness—Nancy’s language invokes a wider range of human experiences, linking the image’s distinction to a kind of “unbinding” (*Ground 3*) from the purely continuous realm of being that recalls the unbinding of Shelley’s Prometheus as the amelioration of enormous suffering.

Indeed, in a gesture that contrasts de Man’s, Nancy will describe the image’s communication of its own difference and distinctness—its situation as a point of joining and dividing or what throughout *The Inoperative Community* he calls *partage*—as “the distance of the touch, that is, barely touching the skin” (*Ground 4*). There is a fleshiness and sensitivity in Nancy’s analysis of the image that invites rather than repudiates the consideration of the psychological and emotional consequences of the oscillation between figuration and disfiguration—that is, the very disfiguration or violence that operates *in* or *as* the action of establishing the finitude of, and therein making, figures. This violence of



the image is something Nancy and de Man both recognize but frame in very different terms. Hence, it is no accident that Nancy's analysis of the image should actively evoke the condition of Shelley's Wandering Jew—indeed, Nancy's chapter on the relationship between the image and the holocaust suggests a strange kind of affinity with Shelley's character—whereas de Man's analysis of autobiography as defacement seems so distant, even eerily silent. Indeed, Nancy describes the portrait (the image of the image or the auto-image) in terms of its affective gravity; the portrait is not merely a picture but “*extracts* something, an intimacy, a force” from the viewer and in so doing leaves as its emissary a disfigured figure who uncannily resembles Shelley's protagonist: “[the portrait] throws it [this intimacy it extracts] in front of us, and this throwing [*jet*], this projection, makes its mark, its very trait and its *stigma*: its tracing, its line, its style, its incision, its scar, its signature, all of this at once” (*Ground* 4).

\* \* \*

De Man displaces self-reflection and autobiography through a particularly mechanical operation of language. Shelley, too, displaces this self-appropriation by inverting operations typically associated with subjective and historical synthesis. Yet Shelley seems concerned not merely to expose history or the self as forms of blindness but also to gauge the affective and psychological toll of this instability. For it does seem to take a toll; it is not a simple thing, for instance, to gaze passively on the triumph of life represented by Ahasuerus and Paulo. So, while they may respond differently to time, both de Man and Shelley expose a similarly problematic, discontinuous concept of temporality at the heart of subjectivity and history. As Gasché notes, “all of de Man's concepts are drawn without exception into a maelstrom of temporalization” heralding the impossibility of conceptual closure: “time prevents the conceptual atoms from exercising their epistemological grip, their totalizing work, by preventing them from closing upon themselves” (33). In other words, time is anathema not only to predictive forms of prophecy but also to history as a form of progressive narrative, recalling Koselleck's discussion of historical temporalization. With the change in the perception of history

from a naturalistic (circular) revolution to something inclusive of revolution *as* revolt, the future and the past begin to look very different—and much more like history in *Hellas*.

In fact, speaking of Chateaubriand as a figure straddling the abyss of dividing historiographies, Koselleck offers an anecdote uncannily germane to Shelley's play and de Man's notion of reading as allegory:

A parallel of the new and the old revolutions was drawn up in 1797 by Chateaubriand in emigration, whence he drew conclusions from the past for the future in the customary manner. But he was soon forced to realize that whatever he had written during the day was by night already overtaken by events. It seemed to him that the French Revolution, quite without previous example, led into an open future. Thus, thirty years later, Chateaubriand placed himself in a historical relation by republishing his outdated essay, without change of substance, but provided with notes in which he proposed progressive constitutional prognoses. (37)

As with *Hellas*, historical material here loses its materiality: the past abdicates its didactic function in the same moment as the future, as something now thoroughly unprecedented becomes opaque. The present, consequently, is overtaken and taken over by relentless change, shrinking to an Augustinian “vanishing point” (258). Or, as Shelley put it in “A Philosophical Review of Reform,” such unstable “events [...] are the rapidly passing shadows, which forerun successful insurrection, the ominous comets of our republican poet perplexing great monarchs with fear of change” (7.17). Indeed, if Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* casts Mohammed the Second's siege of Constantinople as the “funeral oration of the Roman empire” (8.168), Shelley's decision to revive Mohamed suggests a more uncertain, spectral future. That is, the fall of the city represents, for Gibbon, an irreversible condition of utter destruction—the city “was irretrievably subdued” (8.172)—implying that his concept of history is itself fatally linear: “the final extinction of the last two dynasties which [...] reigned in Constantinople [...] terminate the decline and fall of the Roman empire in the East” (8.180). Shelley, however, displaces this *telos*, opening the history of Greece through his invocation of the same instant in which Gibbon's history concludes.

“Could one say that metonymic deconstruction is thus linked in a systematic manner to a metaphoric deconstruction of temporal categories such as those of anteriority and posteriority?” (Gasché 33) When history becomes an allegory of itself or when the Wandering Jew, as the figure of history, undertakes autobiography, then it is not merely that meaningful narrative content or stable subjectivity is displaced. Additionally and fundamentally, the very divisions of time into past, present, and future enter into a kind of allegorical vertigo of non-synthesis. Just as “allegory [...] is a disfigured metaphor whose totalizing potential is metonymically laid out (and, thus, subverted) in an endless process of narrative” (Gasché 31), so history itself in *Hellas* becomes allegory through a prophecy that disfigures figures and a prophet who is the disfigured figure of historical figuration. Thus rendered, history breaks from the past that, under conventional circumstances, it would simply narrate. Put otherwise, the non-dialectical or perhaps negative-dialectical operation that informs de Man’s practice of rhetorical reading offers a set of terms and operations that prove useful for describing how prophecy functions in Shelley and in other Romantic texts—in this study, Blake’s *Milton* will prove exemplary—not as a simply unifying code but, rather, as an ambivalent form of organization that tends, like texts in de Man’s treatment of them, to disorient consciousness *to the same extent that* it orients and collects thought. Yet, unlike de Man’s approach, the texts under consideration here and in the other chapters do not easily relinquish their psychological and affective import. For prophecy, responding to an experience of time made possible in specific historical circumstances, cannot *explain its own rise* in terms of a merely rhetorical operation, and therefore resists being reduced to a purely linguistic operation. Indeed, if prophetic consciousness emerges in part in response to the French Revolution’s displacement of the Classical concept of return, then it makes sense that it should also appear in texts that highlight other, similar revolutions: the American and English (i.e., Cromwellian) revolutions in Blake, the French Revolution in Wordsworth, the Irish Rebellion in Lamb, Medieval Italian and imagined future ‘revolutions’ in Mary Shelley, and, in Percy Shelley, the Greek revolution.

*Hellas* dramatizes the allegorization of history’s autobiography, a process that inverts prophecy’s predictive, synthetic, or restrictive exigency and opens history to a general economy of expenditure. This is perhaps most palpable—in every sense—in the

ambivalent treatment of branding, stamping, and other similar actions of marking throughout the text. This ambivalence undercuts *Hellas*' philhellenism. Indeed, Hassan gets so carried away describing the Greeks' valour that when Mahmud chides him—"your heart is Greek, Hassan" (454)—Hassan can explain his feelings only through appeal to a kind of temporary schizophrenia:

It may be so:

A spirit not my own wrenched me within

And I have spoken words I fear and hate. (455-457)

And yet the theological alliances cannot perfectly square with the political divisions. That is, if the Greeks are aligned with Christianity and the Turks with Islam, Ahasuerus' particular fate tends to undermine the ameliorative connotations of the Holy Crosses that appear as encouraging beacons to the Greeks but as "ominous signs" (601) to the Turks.<sup>102</sup> For one cannot help but recall Ahasuerus' scared brow—the sign of God's disproportionate wrath—when one of the messengers relates how signs

[a]re blazoned broadly on the noonday sky.

One saw a red cross stamped upon the sun;

It has rained blood, and monstrous births declare

The secret wrath of Nature and her Lord. (602-605)

It is, similarly, ironic that Ahasuerus' advice to Mahmud to "look on that which cannot change—the One,/ Unborn and undying" (768-769), should recall the description of eternity a few lines earlier—within one of the interludes—that figures the continuity of history and of thought's eternity in terms of a stamp:

But Greece and her foundations are

Built below the tide of war,

Based on the chrystalline sea

Of thought and its eternity;

Her citizens, imperial spirits,

Rule the present from the past,

On all this world of men inherits

---

<sup>102</sup> Indeed, the introduction of Ahasuerus as a representative of the third major monotheistic faith, Judaism, complicates any simple binary opposition between Islam and Christianity in *Hellas*.

Their seal is set. (696-703)

In the same moment as the text attempts to ensure Greece's victory through metaphysical appeals to the timeless realm of ideas—an assurance, again, that Ahasuerus rather boldly repeats in Mahmud's presence—the language of stamping, of the past indelibly marking the present, seems to call into question the benevolence and moral superiority of the Christian Deity.

If the Cross is supposed to signal Greek liberation, it cannot avoid also signalling perpetual slavery. In fact, the Chorus of Greek women, condemning “Slavery! thou frost of the world's prime” at the hands of the Turks, describes bondage in terms uncannily close to Ahasuerus' predicament:

Thy [i.e., Slavery's] touch has stamped these limbs with crime,  
 These brows thy branding garland bear,  
 But the free heart, the impassive soul  
 Scorn thy controul! (676, 678-681)

With a reversal recalling Aeschylus' model-text, Shelley's conflicting use of this imagery effectively trades *schadenfreude* for a kind of universal sympathy.<sup>103</sup> If the Cross represents Christian liberation from Islamic oppression, it also suggests that that liberation is itself prone to another kind of oppression, therein casting Greek and Turk, Christian and Moslem, into a kind of inoperative community of 'common' non-mastery. After all, while the call of “Victory!” signals the defeat of the Greeks by the Turks, this becomes for Mahmud, the putative victor, a mere byword that promises the sad fate illustrated in his vision of Mohammed the Second—“for thy subjects thou,/ Like us, shalt rule the ghosts of murdered life” (882-883)—and a depressing repetition of violence:

Spirit woe to all!—  
 Woe to the wronged and the avenger! woe  
 To the destroyer, woe to the destroyed!  
 Woe to the dupe; and woe to the deceiver!  
 Woe to the oppressed and woe to the oppressor!

<sup>103</sup> In an interesting reversal not unusual in Greek tragedy, Aeschylus elicits the audience's pity not for the Greeks but for the Persians, specifically Atossa and Xerxes. While *The Persians* certainly has its didactic aspect—the invaders, we are led to believe, are punished by the Greek Gods for their arrogance—the text anchors itself, in affective terms, in the tragic suffering of the ostensible enemy.

Woe both to those that suffer and inflict,  
 To those who are born and those who die! (893-899)

Jerome McGann argues that this kind of frustration “culminates when *Hellas*, hopelessly divided against itself, falls apart in the final act” (41). That is, the Chorus, after imagining “a brighter Hellas” that emerges upon return to a golden era through an economy that would aim to calm down revolution (as revolt) through a reidentification with revolution (as return), cries “O cease! Must hate and death return?” (1066, 1096)—as if the return of better days, a “loftier Argo” or “another Orpheus” or “a new Ulysses,” must also bring with it the violence it seeks to circumvent (1072, 1074, 1076). However, the sense of universal ruin generates precisely the kind of sympathy Kant described in his discussion of the French Revolution as a Sign. If the text does not resolve its negativity dialectically in a vision of concrete progress, this does not mean history or the text simply collapses in impotence. If anything, the text’s final injunction, “Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn/ Of bitter prophecy” (1098-1099), suspends the conservation of cyclical closure, trading the history of violence and the violence of history for an unknown future.

This ambivalence carries over in formal terms as well when Shelley uses Aeschylus’ *The Persians* as his template for *Hellas*. In so doing, he generates another level of reflexive gesturing through citation. Just as Mahmud, in calling on Mahomet the Second, would “cite one out of the grave to tell/ How what was born in blood must die” (810-811), so does Shelley’s text gesture to specific antecedents, though on two different levels. On one hand, Mahmud performs the same action as Atossa in *The Persians* when she calls on the ghost of her late husband and Xerxes’ father, Darius. On the other hand, Shelley’s decision to echo Aeschylus’ formal techniques means that *Hellas*, as a whole, performs a similar kind of solicitation of the dead. Indeed, Shelley seems to mine *The Persians* for the image of prophecy that will reemerge not only in *Hellas* but also, earlier, in *Prometheus Unbound*. That is, while Mahmud in *Hellas* has only an obscure vision that involves a chorus of Greek women and disembodied voices that he can hardly even remember, the “trouble in [her] heart” (164) that disturbs Atossa’s dreams in *The Persians*<sup>104</sup> looks something like a scene from *Prometheus Unbound*:

<sup>104</sup> In his *Compositions from the Tragedies of Aeschylus* (1795), John Flaxman includes an engraving of Atossa’s dream, emphasizing the impact of this episode on Romantic readers of *The Persians*.

Two beautifully dressed women seemed to appear to me, one decked out in Persian robes, the other in Doric clothing. In stature they were conspicuously larger than people are today, and they were faultlessly lovely; they were sisters of one race. One of them lived in her fatherland, Greece, which she had obtained by lot, the other in the land of the barbarians. A conflict between these two arose, as it seemed to me. When my son found out about it he tried to restrain and mollify them; he harnessed them both beneath his chariot and put a yolk-strap beneath their necks. One of them towered proudly in this gear, taking the reins submissively in her mouth, but the other struggled, tore the harness from the chariot with her hands, dragged it violently along without the bridle, and smashed the yolk by the middle. My son fell out. His father Dareios stood close by, pitying him. (181-197)

Shelley seems carefully to translate this allegorical vision of nations into Asia and Panthea. He adopts, for instance, the filial relationship between these spirits, Asia calling Panthea her “sweet sister” (2.1.14). Further, Asia, as the geographical quality of the name suggests, is an updated version of the woman “in Persian robes,” that is, the spirit of the Eastern nation. Panthea, then, represents “the other in the Doric clothing” or Shelley’s revision of Aeschylus’ figure of Greece. That is, more precisely, Panthea is not simply exported from *The Persians*. Rather, the figure of Greece is radically refigured, or even dis-figured, as a kind of placelessness that implies universality, or *pan-theos*. In something as subtle as Shelley’s translation of these figures, then, he manages to make ancient Greece the ancestor and eventual inheritor of the spirit of the Romantic age.

If Asia and Panthea represent avatars of allegorical figures encountered in *The Persians*, then it seems almost as if *Prometheus Unbound* serves as a prophetic spirit, one invoked—as it were—by *Hellas* just as Mahmud invokes Ahasuerus. And, just as prophetic agents in Shelley often do not offer clear signs so much as make supplementary referential gestures, it seems that *Prometheus Unbound* does not so much explain the prophecy in *Hellas* as open on to another prophetic scene wherein historical and political elements are (de)composed. *Hellas* seems to be just another “waking dream” that is “hastening onward,” another scene in the triumph of history (*Triumph* 42, 47).

*Prometheus Unbound*, in other words, “leaves [its] stamp visibly upon the shore/ Until the second bursts,” until *Hellas*, that is, again reformulates Aeschylus’ prophetic imagery, “so on [the reader’s] sight/ Burst a new Vision never seen before” (*Triumph* 409-411). This reconfiguration unbinds what might otherwise seem like the fairly conventional or restricted economy of prediction in *Prometheus Unbound*. For when Asia instructs Panthea, “Lift up thine eyes/ And let me read thy dream” (2.1.55-56), the obscurity of the vision nevertheless recovers the dream as an echo whose insistent “Follow, follow!” (2.1.163) propels the sisters and the narrative toward Jove’s crisis and the subsequent utopian vision of the future represented in Act Four. That is, Shelley offers a very affirmative vision of not only the future in *Prometheus Unbound* but of futurity, suggesting that the future as a dimension of temporality is something that the present can make sense of in advance:

And our singing shall build,  
 In the Void’s loose field,  
 A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;  
 We will take our plan  
 From the new world of man  
 And our work shall be called the Promethean. (4.153-158)

This strongly predictive dimension may derive in part from Shelley’s engagement with Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, wherein Prometheus’ mode of foresight is clearly predictive:

Wait, what am I saying?  
 I know how it all turns out:  
 no unforeseen  
 heartbreaks for me.  
 I see,  
 I do what I am bound to do, and take the consequence  
 as best I can. (152-158)<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> J.S. Morrison elaborates on this point in the context of Greek concepts of prophecy and practices of divination in the ancient world, noting that

Aeschylus puts into the mouth of his hero an account of the arts of civilization which he claims to have brought to mankind. Sandwiched in between medicine and mining, we find a description of



Admittedly, it is not necessarily that Shelley's Prometheus predicts what the future will precisely look like; but, in prophetically announcing and pronouncing the Promethean Age, he suggests that this future is continuous with human thought and language—Prometheus' gifts to humanity—and that history comes to a somewhat Hegelian end in the sense of achieving Absolute selfhood. This closure of history places emphasis on prophecy as a predictive, synthesizing form of consciousness.

Contrastingly, Asia and Panthea, through whom prophecy emerges as a kind of dialogic imagination, are unable to curtail their allusiveness to *The Persians* and their anticipation of the warring nations in *Hellas*; if prophecy as prediction correlates to a bound pro-metheus, Shelley's unbinding of all typical forms of synthesis means that he instigates a breach in stable identity. These associations with the past (Aeschylus' Greece) and the future (Shelley's Hellas) complicates *Prometheus Unbound*'s transitional role by involving the very agents of prophecy in a nexus of relations that fuel a general economy of expenditure. That is, Shelley's hyper-reflexivity means that while Aeschylus' text is used as a model for figuration, it just as quickly flits out of sight, such that the trace it leaves, *Prometheus Unbound*, becomes the new model for *Hellas*. *The Persians* stands before *Prometheus Unbound* just as *Prometheus Unbound* stands before *Hellas*. But then this series is short-circuited: for *Hellas* attempts to recall the model for its model, *The Persians*, directly, just as Mahmud bushes Ahasuerus aside and calls on Mahomet the Second. Mahmud is left only further disoriented by the various prophets he interrogates. Similarly, Shelley's adoption of *The Persians*' form does not close *Hellas*' referential potential by 'getting back to' the source or origin of figuration. Rather, the

---

the arts of divination which may serve as a concluding summary although it also reminds us that there were branches of the mantic art which we have been unable to touch:

And many ways of prophecy I put in order, and first interpreted what must come of dreams in waking hours, and the obscure import of wayside signs and voices I defined, and taught them to discern the various flights of taloned birds, which of them favourable and which of ill foreboding, and the ways of life by each pursued, their mating season, their hatreds and their loves for one another; the entrails too, of what texture and hue they must appear to please the sight of heaven; the dappled figure of the gall and liver, the thigh-bone wrapt in fat and the long chine I burnt and led man to the riddling art of divination; and augury by fire, for long in darkness hid, I brought to light. (110-111)

As hinted at in the above passage, divination in Classical Greece involved a range of slightly different practices, drawing distinctions between not only passive divination (*omina oblativa*) and active divination (*omina impetrativa*) but more precisely between augury as performed by a *mantis*, sacrifice conducted by an *hiereus*, and dream interpretation undertaken by an *oneiropolos* (Morrison 146, 92). The salient commonality for the present investigation is that all these forms of divination aim to extend understanding, to render the strange familiar, or to eliminate ambiguity.

attempt to close history, to return Greece to Hellas by returning *Hellas* to *The Persians*, is unbound by *Prometheus*' ambivalent temporality, Asia and Panthea's relation to the past and the future. Like the reciprocal prefacing between Blake's texts, discussed in the next chapter, the rhythm of deferral that emerges between Shelley's texts reflects the shape of forgetful memory first encountered in *The Wandering Jew* but that recurs and gains intensity in *Prometheus*' memory of the forgotten curse, Mahmud's memory of his forgotten dream (also a kind of curse) and, finally, as the fragmentary, narrative form of *The Triumph of Life*. The Wandering Jew is the embodiment of autobiography's defacement and becomes an allegory for reading history *as* allegory: that is, for reading history as temporally detotalized rather than as a symbolic synthesis composed by metaphor. The counterhistory he embodies is not, however, restricted to him alone. Anticipating Mary Shelley's universalization of history's violence in *The Last Man*, when the Jew's historicity finds expression in Shelley meta-textually, detotalizing Shelley's *oeuvre*, he opens the future to something not-yet-conscious through a prophecy of pure exodus.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> In chapter five I turn to Ernst Bloch's notions of exodus and utopia (as something not-yet-conscious) as modes of formulating the kind of ambivalent prophecy theorized throughout this project. Indeed, Bloch's concept of prophecy elaborates on the Judaic understanding of history implicit in the (dis)figuration of Shelley's Jew.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## “And heard/ The poet mutter his prelusive songs”: Blake’s Beginnings

Irony [...] knows it has the power to start all over again if it so pleases; anything that happened before is not binding.

—Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*

## I. “labourers divine”: Remembering and Dismembering Milton

The prevailing critical narrative of Blake’s *oeuvre* suggests that his early texts, including the Lambeth books, represent defective, incomplete efforts at a systematic mythology, one adequately realized only in the later illuminated books, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where “every word and every letter” experimented with in the ‘primitive’ works finally “is studied and put into its fit place” (*Jerusalem* 3). This idea of retroactive arrangement operates on a model of apocalyptic redemption, as if the “iconic space of the illuminated book” (Rajan “System” 384) rescues its own prefatory materials from obscurity. In fact, from the perspective of the achieved *telos*, Blake’s minor prophecies, thanks to their dramatic fragmentation, negatively predict the synthetic whole that will perform hermeneutic salvation. For instance, Northrop Frye argues that “all of Blake’s poetry, from the shortest lyric to the longest prophecy, must be taken as a unit and, *mutatis mutandis*, judged by the same standard. This means that the longer and more difficult prophecies will have to bear the weight of the commentary” (5). In this, Frye seems to turn his reading of Blakean prophecy—the contractual pattern, “if you go on So the result is So” (AnnWatson 14; E 607), implying a restricted and predictive form of prophecy—into a model for reading Blake: “we must accept in Blake a certain amount of prophecy in the literal sense of anticipating the probable future, and must see in his conception of Deism a mental attitude which is still with us, the monstrous hydra which is the perverted vision of human society as an atomic aggregate of egos instead of as a larger human body” (54). In other words, Blake’s ‘corpus,’ in Frye’s estimation, must depart from the atomic and atomizing chaos of the Lambeth books to culminate in “autobiography in *Milton*, and with history as cosmic autobiography in *Jerusalem*” (Rajan “System” 389).

Indeed, *Milton* does attempt in several ways to absorb and re-organize the often dense and nebulous productions typical of Blake's art up to the major prophecies, suggesting—at least on first glance—that these later works operate according to the conventional sense of prophecy as conservation, prediction, and economic restriction. *Milton* does this, for one, by way of citation: the literal incorporation (and figural 'digestion') of earlier characters, passages of text, and concepts. As early as *Milton*'s third plate, for instance, Blake's Bard offers a condensed version of *The [First] Book of Urizen*. In fact, upon observing Urizen's (de)formation, Los seems to re-embody the speaker from Blake's "Memorable Fancy" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (18-20) who identifies the Angel's "dark visions of torment" (*Urizen* 1.13)—a conglomeration of nightmare images including "black & white spiders" and "the head of Leviathan" (18)—as something "owing to [the Angel's] metaphysics" (19), confirming that the "Eye altering alters all" (E 476). For when Los looks upon Urizen's formation "his immortal limbs/ Grew deadly pale; he became what he beheld" (*Milton* 3.28-29), effectively intellectualizing and in some sense ameliorating the confusion of agent and patient in *Urizen* described more traumatically and mythopoetically in terms of a physical fracture: "Urizen was rent from his [Los'] side" and the wound "heal'd not" (*Urizen* 6.4; 7.4). The description of human formation similarly seems to combine the language of involution and vegetable growth familiar from *Urizen* with the notion that "mans desires are limited by his perceptions" (E 1), asserted not only in short prose tracts like "There is no Natural Religion" and "All Religions are One" but also explored dramatically in *The Book of Thel* and in the dialectical relationship between innocence and experience in the *Songs*. For if "the five Senses" are "the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (*Marriage* 4), the language in *Milton* neatly frames these inlets also as barriers that "shut" perception "in narrow doleful form[s]": the "Eye of Man a little narrow orb closd up & dark" and "the Ear, a little shell in small volutions shutting out/ All melodies" (*Milton* 5.19, 21, 23-24). In fact, the entire tenor of the Bard's song detailing the destruction of Palamabron's harrow and Satan's mills seems to elaborate on the destructiveness of "Satans mildness" and "pity false" warned of more briefly in "A Poison Tree" (*Milton* 7.21, 29).<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> "If you account it Wisdom when you are angry to be silent, and/ Not to shew it: I do not account that Wisdom but Folly" (*Milton* 4.6-7)

There is a sense, perhaps, that in Los' declaration of sorrow—"this mournful day/ Must be a blank in Nature" (*Milton* 8.20-21)—he attempts to mourn the trauma of the Lambeth books, suggesting that *Milton* returns to the past in an effort of textual or artistic self-therapy. Indeed, the damage occasioning this day of mourning follows from the failure properly to divide and organize labour. The problems begin when Satan

soft intreated Los to give him Palamabron's station;

For Palamabron returned with labour wearied every evening

Palamabron oft refus'd; and as often Satan offer'd

His service till by repeated offers and repeated intreaties

Los gave to him the Harrow of the Almighty[.] (*Milton* 7.6-10)

Whether from lack of experience or, as Leutha later claims, her own unobserved and ill-advised attempt "to unloose the flaming steeds/ As Elynittria use'd to do," this role reversal proves disastrous in that Satan leaves Palamabron's "horses [...] mad! his Harrow confounded! his companions enrag'd!" (*Milton* 12.11-12; 8.17, 18). Blake here rewrites the Satanic hubris of *Paradise Lost* as failed apprenticeship, turning a metaphysical allegory of Evil's fall from Good into a question of Greek "virtue" understood in the Classical sense of technical knowledge, craft, or skill.<sup>108</sup> Further, the nature of the tools and labours in question reinforces the notion that the Bard's song illustrates the history of Blake's own writing practice and the sense that earlier texts represent the 'uneven soil' that *Milton* will aim to cultivate for future, organic growth. Hence, Los' problem with dividing and organizing labour is also Blake's problem, especially in the Lambeth books, of organizing and dividing poetic labour. The tool at the centre of the dispute, Palamabron's harrow, is an agricultural implement, similar to a plough. As the Oxford English Dictionary describes, a harrow is a sled or "heavy frame of timber (or iron) set with iron teeth or tines, which is dragged over ploughed land to break clods, pulverize and stir the soil, root up weeds, or cover in the seed" (OED n1). The harrow is, in other words, a tool that performs a kind of engraving. Additionally, it facilitates sowing or invests the space of the field with a kind of potential that will literally bear fruit just as the surface of Blake's page continues to bear intellectual fruit.

---

<sup>108</sup> "The word 'virtue' attaches false associations to the Greek *arete*, which meant primarily efficiency at a particular task" (Guthrie 72).

The harrow, taken reflexively as a figure for Blake's artistic practice in *Milton*, rakes over and recycles earlier, fragmentary texts and submits them to the mechanical divisions of agricultural labour and the organic temporality within seasonal rhythms.

This agricultural imagery and the sense of manual labour is complicated, however, given the double sense of the word "harrow": as a verb, "harrow" means to plunder and cannot be invoked without recalling Christ's harrowing of Hell. Like the farming practice that materially resembles Blake's artistic technique, Christ's actions represent preparation and organization—the prelude to apocalypse. Yet, the theological connotations stress a new relationship in that harrowing refers to a kind of rescue, redemption, or re-collection. Going beyond the allusion to Blake's material practices, the theological connotations of the act suggest that the Bard's song in *Milton* is concerned specifically with the mode of labour represented in *illuminated* engraving, a type of 'harrowing' that aims to establish a universal and metaphysical organization based on recovering—in the double sense of redeeming and planting in soil—the rich but unstable potential within textual fragments. So, the Bard's song becomes a parable about the necessity for artistic autonomy when it comes to performing the kind of harrowing—inspired re-writing—necessary to produce illuminated texts. For the artist need not appeal to or rely on external authorities to 'ameliorate' his struggles—"The eagle never lost so much time. as when he submitted to learn of the crow" (*Marriage* 8.39). Rather he must turn inward, or in Blake's case back to the texts that populate his creative 'underworld,' and harrow up not lost souls but textual predecessors. In other words, Blake rewrites Christian redemption as citation, such that theological harrowing becomes a material practice to the same extent as the physical act of engraving enters into a new contract with divinity in the form of the illuminated book.

*Milton* aims to redeem earlier works—effectively converting those works into pre-faces to the countenance represented by the proper name, "Milton"—including not just Blake's works but John Milton's, through 'harrowing' or divine citation. This re-collection—like the effort Mahmud makes in *Hellas* to "cite one out of the grave" (810)—seems, however, to introduce disorder in the very action of organization. That is, agricultural harrowing neatly lines the field and Christ's harrowing separates the damned from the saved. Yet, Blake's treatment of the divisions or what he calls "classes" of

people seems to confuse the conventional, Calvinistic understanding whence the categories are derived:

[There are] Three Classes of Men regulated by Los's Hammer.

The first, the Elect from before the foundation of the World:

The second, The Redeem'd. The Third, The Reprobate & form'd

To destruction from the mothers womb: follow with me my plow! (6.35-7.3)

The Bard's call to follow his plow here invokes the harrow and its ordering exigency even as it suggests a new direction, one that might cut across the neat divisions of the Calvinistic-Platonic classes described. For later we find that the Reprobate are free, the Redeemed victims of what Blake elsewhere calls "Priesthood" (*Marriage* 11, E 37), while the Elect are the truly damned. Indeed, Milton's act of self-annihilation, discussed below, amounts to a kind of de-election since the "Selfhood" is identified with "Satan" (*Milton* 14.30) and Satan is earlier identified with the Elect.<sup>109</sup> So, later on when "Los stood & cried to the Labourers of the Vintage" that they "must bind the Sheaves not by Nations or Families" but by "Three Classes" (25.16, 26)—effectively "separating what has been mixed" (25.28) in what sounds like a revision of the parable of the Sower in the Gospels<sup>110</sup>—he just as quickly confuses the distinctions he has demanded his workers to observe:

The Elect is one Class: You

Shall bind them separate: they cannot Believe in Eternal Life

Except by Miracle & New Birth. The other two Classes;

The Reprobate who never cease to Believe, and the Redeemd,

Who live in doubts & fears perpetually tormented by the Elect

These you shall bind in a twin-bundle for the Consummation[.] (*Milton* 25.32-37)

Here the Elected individual proves to be the self-satisfied hypocrite whom John Milton, in *Aeropagitica*, described as a "heretick in the truth," one who "believe[s] things only because his Pastor sayes so" rather than basing belief on a deeper, critically examined

<sup>109</sup> "the Class of Satan shall be call'd the Elect" (*Milton* 11.21)

<sup>110</sup> Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:1-15.

rationale (n. pag). Blake seems to invert the meaning of the second class as well: the Redeemed, contrary to the sense of successful completion denoted by the name, are here described as perpetually striving toward the status denied them by the Elect, perpetuating self-victimization. Finally, it is the Reprobate, whom one would expect, given the sense of criminality the word implies, to be damned, that prove to be most faithful. In other words, in this reorganization of classes Blake has managed to disorganize and revise the concept of organization itself, suggesting that “faithfulness” means not perpetual stasis but rather ongoing self re-creation as immanent reprobation. This seems, then, to displace the sense of harrowing as absolute, apocalyptic recollection, in that this new kind of faithfulness incorporates the negativity necessary for change and responsiveness. Indeed, when Blake warns us to “Expect poison from the standing water” (*Marriage* 9.45), he echoes Milton’s description of a more active form of faith: for Milton likewise insists “that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion. Truth is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick’n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition” (*Areopagitica* n. pag.).

*Milton* continues this rhythm of (dis)organization—a rhythm that complicates the purely recuperative sense of prophecy typically associated with the major prophecies—through its redundant and layered mapping. That is, throughout the text Blake writes psychodrama as geography, then again as history, as personal vision, as biography, and finally as autobiography. Consider, for instance, geography: taking his cue from Jacob’s re-nomination and metamorphosis in the Hebrew Bible<sup>111</sup> that sees the subject divided geographically according to the biological dictates of Israel’s progeny, Blake maps the universe through spiritual entities, the Four Zoas:

Four Universes round the Mundane Egg remain Chaotic

One to the North, named Urthona: one to the South, named Urizen:

One to the East, named Luvah: One to the West named Tharmas[.] (*Milton* 19.15-17)

This mapping becomes more complex when Blake turns various human institutions into cities: Allamanda is commerce (27.42), Bowlahoola is law (24.48) and Golgonooza is

<sup>111</sup> Renamed “Israel,” Jacob becomes identical to the nation itself. See Genesis 32:24-32.



“Art & Manufacture” (24.50). But then this map is again transposed or remapped in terms of the body when “the City of Golgonooza/ Which is the spiritual fourfold London” is located “in the loins of Albion” (20.39-40). In fact, Milton’s spatial trajectory or “track” that describes his descent through the universe seems to pass through variously overdetermined “states,” places that are politically defined nations, physical organs of the body, and psychological categories:

And the Four States of Humanity in its Repose,  
 Were shewd them. First of Beulah a most pleasant Sleep  
 On Couches soft, with mild music, tended by Flowers of Beulah  
 Sweet female forms, winged or floating in the air spontaneous  
 The Second State is Alla & the third State Al-Ulro;  
 But the Fourth State is dreadful; it is named Or-Ulro:  
 The First State is the Head, the Second is in the Heart:  
 The Third in the Loins & Seminal Vessels & the Fourth  
 In the Stomach & Intestines terrible, deadly, unutterable (34.8-16)

This redundancy of organization, one that goes so far as to take organization literally, does less to establish a single, simplified picture—an apocalyptic totality—than to suggest, ironically, a perpetual displacement of the very systems of organization themselves, the next coming to supplement the previous like Shelley’s messengers in *Hellas*. Writing psychodrama as geography, history, personal vision, biography, psychology and so forth, in an effort to appropriate the internal order of each system, seems in fact to undermine *Milton*’s ostensible narrative simultaneity and to displace total conceptual or visionary unity.

If *classes* (dis)organize different groups of people, *states* (dis)organize individuals. For instance, *Milton* offers a metaphysical commentary on subjectivity, calling the reader to “Distinguish [...] States from Individuals in those States./ States Change: but Individual Identities never change nor cease” (32.22-23). In other words, “state” here seems to be understood as a way of being that could include a psychological type in addition to a material, physical, political, or geographically determined place. Indeed, the text reveals that “selfhood” is one particular state of being, one that is

sometimes named “Satan,” and that might be analogous to the class of the Elect.<sup>112</sup> Hence, Milton’s difficult task—one that rewrites his investment in Cromwell’s political revolution as subjective transformation—is to change his ‘state’ in this broader application. In fact, Milton has to become the very *state of re-stating*, in every sense. Put differently, he must become the state in or of revolution:

And thou O Milton art a State about to be Created  
Called Eternal Annihilation that none but the Living shall  
Dare to enter[.] (32.26-28)

“Milton” is the state of the re-vision of states—a shape of consciousness that can “Judge [...] of thy Own Self” precisely “What is Eternal & what Changeable? & what Annihilable!” (32.30, 31). In other words, “Milton” seems to name the state wherein the individual emerges in terms of his or her radical individuality, a state that pushes beyond its own initial demarcations to become ‘identical’ with individuality. But with this Milton does not fall into Satanic self-possession because the individual itself is understood not to be a mode of permanence but rather merely the punctual location of the power of self-annihilation. For what Blake calls the *individual* could be called the *imagination*: “The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself/ Affection or Love becomes a State, when divided from Imagination” (32.33-34). The individual as imagination is, then, the power of re-stating—a power that will “never change nor cease” and yet will never ossify, either, since it is nothing other than productive negation that displaces itself endlessly.

In *On the Relationship of the Fine Arts to Nature*, Friedrich Schelling describes a type of vision capable of truly visionary insight, offering a reflection on art uncannily germane to Blake’s method of revealing the imagination as a power of re-stating through the destruction of outward form. It is what Schelling calls the “spiritual eye” that “penetrates the exterior and feels the active force” within nature and art (in Wirth xi). As Jason Wirth explains, “the spiritual eye [...] intimates the unprethinkable future in a thing, that is, its ‘creating life’ and its ‘power to exist’” (xi). As such, this eye does not

---

<sup>112</sup> In one of many complex allusions to *Paradise Lost*, Blake here seems to elaborate on Satan’s assertion that Hell is a ‘state of mind’: “Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell” (4.75). That is, while Satan discovers that Hell is a mode of the self’s being, Blake suggests that the self itself is Satan—almost inverting even while preserving something of Satan’s insight.

see what is merely sensible; as in Blake's art, the effort here seems to be to gain insight to the larger realm of perception, precisely what the five senses deny—for the senses allow access to the perceptible only insofar as they radically circumscribe that same realm according to the finite limitations of the sensory organs. Yet, just as Schelling will insist that "we must go through the form in order to gain it back as intelligible, alive, and as truly felt" (in Wirth xi), so Blake's discussion of states in and of creation takes the reader beyond any static form and, instead, to the imagination as the vitally metaphorical power to re-form—politically, psychologically, and artistically. Indeed, if Milton's redemption, displacing the economy of harrowing as pure re-collection, coincides with self-annihilation, so too will Schelling insist that the feeling gained through the spiritual eye relies on the destruction of the very form that serves, in its beauty, only as a provisional mediator: "only through the completion of form can the form be annihilated" (in Wirth xi).

This sense of Milton as a state that seeks, through an 'embodiment' of negativity visible to the spiritual eye, to express the surging, heterogeneous power of the imagination, turns inside out Blake's effort to formalize and contain psychodrama as biography and autobiography. As in Shelley's treatment of the Wandering Jew, (auto)biography is, in *Milton*, coextensive with defacement. When confronted with the task of mourning or harrowing Blake's dark materials, *Milton's* biographical and autobiographical power to synthesize history according to the model or scheme of subjective *Bildung* seems to break down. This is because the totalizing form itself is infected by discontinuity, the body of the text defaced, as it were, by its ostensible prefaces. If the subject is supposed to form the ground upon which to formulate Blake's visionary system, the 'state' of self-annihilation (in scare quotes since this is the state of re-stating) as the *telos* of Milton's redemption seems to disperse even as it gathers together elements from earlier works in Blake's *oeuvre*. In fact, the text subtly complicates the idea of foundation. For just as the Bard's parable has the effect of "Shaking the roots & fast foundations of the Earth in doubtfulness" (14.8), so his description of the state of Jerusalem—again, a "state" in every sense—remains teetering precariously on the edge of destruction given that the speaker's ambiguity opens the concept of state foundation to radical ambivalence:

The Surrey hills glow like the clinkers of the furnace: Lambeths Vale  
 Where Jerusalems foundations began; where they were laid in ruins  
 Where they were laid in ruins from every Nation & Oak Groves Rooted  
 Dark gleams before the Furnace-mouth a heap of burning ashes  
 When shall Jerusalem return & overspread all the Nations  
 Return: return to Lambeths Vale O building of human souls  
 Thence stony Druid Temples overspread the Island white  
 And thence from Jerusalems ruins[.] (*Milton* 6.14-21)

On one hand, the passage suggests that Jerusalem represents the original foundation of England, that Druid temples are the material traces of this original culture, and that it is a matter not of Jerusalem's arrival but rather its return. On the other, the passage repeats that these foundations "were laid in ruins." This could mean that the foundations were set amidst ruins of a previous civilization or amidst Blake's own artistic productions associated with his time living in "Lambeths Vale," that is, the Lambeth Books. The phrase, however, also says that the foundations in question were destroyed. It becomes impossible, in other words, to quarantine the sense of foundation from the destruction of that same foundation, of grounding from ungrounding, turning the most basic notion of architectural organization and ordering into disorder.

It is on this note that one could turn from the various and overlapping forms of essentially spatial ordering described thus far in terms of harrowing, mapping, and building to questions of temporal ordering. Just as forms of spatial ordering introduce disorder, so *Milton* cannot quite assimilate its temporally prefatory materials. As the constituent elements of the sublime vision that *Milton* is poised on the verge of revealing, these materials function much like the sense organs throughout Blake's work: apparati that facilitate *to the same extent as* they hamper perception. Put differently, Blake offers another version of prophetic ambivalence in that *Milton's* prophetic status seems divided between a conservative concept of prediction, apocalypse, and redemption and a "Wild Thyme" (*Milton* 31.51) that deranges those very forms of continuity. More specifically, Blake highlights this ambivalence in and through his treatment of prefaces. As literary performances of temporal inauguration, prefaces seem to act like prophets, standing before a narrative, inaugurating a set of events, and unifying that narrative of events from

the outset. However, a closer look at the nature of the preface and Blake's treatment of them suggests that here, too, an ostensibly organizing phenomenon is internally divided. In this case the break is particularly temporal and involves the prefaces' antithetical commitments to the future and the past. This, then, turns *Milton's* prophetic dimension away from the ostensible advance to "the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations" (*Milton* 43.1), diffusing the intensity of monumental vision by redirecting attention to the powerful negativity that makes re-vision possible. Finally, this is to suggest that the recuperative vision of prophecy cannot, ultimately, accomplish the work of mourning, cannot completely absorb *Urizen's* traumatic origin(al)ity. Hence, if *Urizen* is a prophetic text it is so only as that which—like Wordsworth—calls to prophecy in an effort to ameliorate a loss of narrative and subjective coherence: *Urizen*, performing the 'inaugurating' violence (discussed below) of what Schelling will describe as the maddening circulation of potencies, calls forward to *Milton's* predictive vision as a form of mourning and yet contaminates that same recuperation by insisting upon prophecy's traumatic 'foundations.'

## II. Prelude to the Beginning

The discussion of Blake's prefaces benefits from a distinction between beginnings and starts. A start is one kind of temporal formulation and distinct from that of the beginning. A start would be comparatively unproblematic: one could locate a start wherever one pleased and could precipitate a start without any inconvenience. A beginning, on the other hand, would involve a point of absolute precedence and anteriority, and in this sense would involve a different temporal matrix from the start—that is, would not be on the same horizon as a start. For one can always make a start; people, every day, can and do make starts. And one can always abandon something and start again. This was evident in chapter two, as Wordsworth, for instance, seems always to be starting *The Prelude* over again. A start, however, cannot make the same existential claims as a beginning: it does not relate to the things that emerge from the start in the same way as the beginning does, since the start is annihilated by the work to come. A beginning, then, is in some sense eternal or beyond time, as Schelling would speak of an

eternal beginning in the *Ages of the World*: a beginning that “never ceases to be a beginning” (17).<sup>113</sup> This is not a start that one can move away from or beyond, but a radical positing that has to contend endlessly with the abyss that is its logical condition of (im)possibility. The beginning is what holds open the perpetual possibility of a start without, itself, starting; this is why it demands its own temporal horizon. So, when Wordsworth and Blake both try in their respective works to recuperate the *beginning*, the difficulty with such projects presents itself symptomatically, namely, in terms of the more discrete, literary conundrum of how to *start* a text about *beginning*. Hence, the “false starts” (Rajan “System” 385) witnessed in several of Blake’s Lambeth books, Wordsworth’s series of *Preludes*, and Shelley’s repeated invocation of the Wandering Jew, who seems always to stand on the threshold of a history that will properly begin the work of healing and mourning. Because these works seek the more radical beginning—either cosmic in Blake, subjective in Wordsworth, or historical in Shelley—they offer a way for what cannot easily be figured in chronological sequence (that is, *beginning*) to ‘appear,’ but only as a kind of unfeasibility, unreadability, or recalling the terms of the preceding chapter, disfiguration: a ‘pre-face’ in every sense. Perpetual *starting* figures the failure to recuperate *beginning*. This is registered in the effort exerted by both Wordsworth and Blake to start the text from a place of sufficient but ultimately unreachable anteriority. Wordsworth gestures at this anteriority most explicitly in the “Intimations Ode,” although it is also behind the linguistic and logical acrobatics of the ‘prophetic’ *call to prophecy* discussed in chapter two. This is the effort to solicit and to claim artistic authority in the same breath, and leads to the temporal problem whereby the future seems to open only through a gesture of retrospection—an attempt to contain time through experience even as the experience *of time’s* impalpable impression betrays the futility of such delicate webs of tenses.

The preludia in question<sup>114</sup> are, then, the disfigured figurations of a radical beginning, where beginning is a force, dimension, or ontological structure that exceeds any kind of finite localization: the beginning is what creates the possibility of starting but also what makes every particular start into a kind of betrayal (in every sense) of the

<sup>113</sup> All references, unless otherwise specified, are to the 1815 version of *Ages of the World*.

<sup>114</sup> The ‘preludes’ that I have in mind are works from the Lambeth period, particularly the minor prophecies and the Books of Ahania, Los, and Urizen.

beginning. The beginning does not start because it is the very *ability* to start, to negate, or to inaugurate. In being this power, the beginning must always remain in the beginning, can never be reduced to or appropriated by the particular projects that might make a start. For if the beginning started, if it took on flesh, as it were, and became past, it would foreclose the possibility of any new starts, would revoke the horizon it opens for new starts, and existence would be rendered completely, sequentially determined. Hence, from a practical perspective, if there is to be existential freedom, the beginning must not start. This is not because the beginning is some kind of transcendental signified or idea—if it does not start, that does not mean that it rests in self-sufficiency. Rather, it is because the beginning does *not* have being itself that it can function as the ‘ground’ of starts. The temporality of beginning recalls the abyss of anteriority that would solicit the infinite regression of prefaces to prefaces that Blanchot—noted above—sees as the paradox whereby one can start writing only if one has already written. The start, by contrast, is the fiat that ruptures this cycle, almost like the emergence of the Godhead out of Schelling’s rotary motion of the potencies (discussed below), calming primordial turbulence into a dialectical process—at least temporarily. Such a fiat inaugurates a development only *temporarily* because ultimately it cannot quite silence the beginning, or cannot quite overcome and absorb the negativity of beginning. The start cannot put the beginning in its proper place, as it were, such that when starts themselves become the centre of attention, they reveal their susceptibility to regression.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> “To put this in modern terms, the *infinite greatness* of creating Beginning is lost now, with this future-facing *Veni creator spiritus*, in the *infinite smallness* of a Beginning which is no more than a beginning, a state of pure need. Nor is this new Beginning any once-and-for-all, mythical, pre-earthly creation of the universe, leaving room only for beings which are in themselves complete. It is, rather, a simple *X*, an Alpha present in all being. Incomplete and unobjective in itself, it draws man on through the transient darkness of each moment in the Way of the World. It is the *Not-there of each present Moment*, which, still veiled to itself and seeking itself, truly ‘evolves’ into being in and through World-process and its experimental forms, for it is their primary stimulus and driving-force. Its place in human history is at the decisive front of the *Experimentum mundi*, where man lies equally open to everything and nothing, to fulfillment and to ruin, and where the world is in high labour as the *Laboratorium possibilis salutis*. The *topos* of Way—and, even more so, End—is the same endless forward-looking openness, not the closed *topos* of the astral myth with its ‘eternal iron laws’; it is the great *topos* of the Future, still full of objective and really available possibilities for birth, development and experimental forms of fulfillment; the *topos* where the *X* of the Beginning runs ever onward in the still immediate, unmediated, unobjectified, unmanifested Here-and-now of each present moment. [...]. The true world is here still uncreated, it *has its being in newness*—which is quite the opposite of the antiquarian mythology of *Deus creator* and of an utterly complete, fulfilled Beginning.” (Bloch *Atheism in Christianity* 221)

With Blake, we see how prefatory negativity resists complete chronological discipline through his struggles with *starting* his minor prophecies—that is, with initiating those texts that are supposed, in turn, to constitute the prefatory material for *Milton*. In other words, when we consider Blake’s attempts to initiate various texts, we see how the abyss of the beginning irritates and even revokes the starts it makes possible or how, in the words of Michel Foucault, the “ceaseless rending open” of the origin’s retreat and return “frees the origin in exactly the degree to which it [i.e., that same origin] recedes” (334).<sup>116</sup> The very struggle to start would be a *sign* of the beginning, not the beginning ‘itself’—in scare quotes since, to adapt a Schellingian gambit, we can say *what* a beginning is but not *that* it is. Put differently, Blake’s preludia represent locations of mediation where eternity (as eternal beginning) intersects time (punctual, discrete starts), just as the prophet is the immediate mediator of the divine Word.<sup>117</sup> The anteriority that the prelude or preface claims therefore echoes the prophet’s complex position not merely in terms of his ostensible anteriority respecting historical events.<sup>118</sup> The analogy between preface and prophet, in addition, discloses a common traumatic economy: just as the prophet is traumatized not so much by simply missing an experience but by the attempt to *encounter*, by narrating, the missed experience with the unconditional, so too do Blake’s prefaces writhe under the impossible demand to reconcile eternal beginning with chronological starts—a problem Foucault will see, more broadly, as “the foundation for

---

<sup>116</sup> For Foucault, “what is conveyed in the immediacy of the original is [...] that man is cut off from the origin that would make him contemporaneous with his own existence; amid all the things that are born in time and no doubt die in time, he, cut off from all origin, is already there” (332). To say, then, that the beginning never (properly) begins means to register a shift in the very concept of origin such that modern consciousness, “as opposed to the things to whose glittering birth time allows to show in all its density, is the being without origin, who has ‘neither country nor date,’ whose birth is never accessible because it never took ‘place’” (331-332). The origin’s return, for Foucault, becomes its palpable retreat in precisely the way the beginning insists within the start or in the way Urizen’s genesis is also his dismemberment. Indeed, if Foucault’s aim is “to make visible that rent, devoid of chronology and history, from which time issued” (332), his goal parallels Blanchot’s and repeats the delicacy of the latter’s phenomenology of literature. For Blanchot’s “literature” is a form of writing that has, in Heidegger’s sense, become concerned about its own being and has asked the question of being which is inseparable from the question of time.

<sup>117</sup> In fact, this intersection reflects Schelling’s sense of eternity as a concept that includes rather than excludes time. Traditionally, eternity is thought of as outside of time, as beyond the effects of temporal determinations. Schelling, however, imagines eternity distributed in terms of temporal categories—there is an eternal past, eternal present, and eternal future—because “the true eternity does not exclude all time but rather contains time (eternal time) subjugated within itself. Actual eternity is the overcoming of time” (43). This will prove important later on in Section IV when considering how Blake sees the eternal within the temporal as the eternal *capacity* for temporal re-determination.

<sup>118</sup> As noted in the Introduction, the etymology of the word “inaugurate”—“To make auspicious or of good augury” (OED 3)—suggests that the notion of starting is subtly related to the notion of prophecy.



our experience of time, and, since the nineteenth century, as the starting-point of all our attempts to re-apprehend what beginning and re-beginning, the recession and the presence of the beginning, the return and the end, could be in the human sphere" (333). When this *aporia* reaches its most reflexive, anxious peak in the abyssal regression of prefaces to prefaces, Blake's prophetic time overlaps with Kierkegaardian irony as perpetual inauguration, revealing itself as neither predictive nor apocalyptic, but as an elusive, detotalizing itinerary.

In other words, Blake is full of false starts because he cannot properly start. But what would it mean to start *properly*? In a sense, Blake's relentless rewriting, character recycling, and internal citation witnessed, as discussed above, especially in *Milton* leads one to ask: what if there is no such thing as a *proper* start? Can there really be a start that is perfectly self-appropriating or self-contained? Would this containment not preclude the action of self-transgression or self-transcendence that would seem to define a start? The fact is, there are only ever 'false starts.' One cannot start except 'falsely,' or through a loss of total coherence and the distribution of 'property' because a start places the very notions of the "total" and "coherent" into crisis: the start would suspend the totality as such and demand coherence to reconsider its systematization in light of the new. Moreover, since starts do not emerge out of nothing, every start is also an end to whatever it breaks from. Hence, Ian Balfour, following Blanchot, will make much of the sense that prophecy is, in the first instance, already "pervasively citational" ("Future," 117): the prophet *repeats*, or cites, the words of the God in his or her 'original,' inspired, and ostensibly *immediate* utterance. The presence—and the present it seems to occupy—of prophetic speech is fractured by this referentiality (to say nothing of the aforementioned conflict between prophecy as, simultaneously, promise and threat) that gestures toward an always anterior power or proper be(ginn)ing. For instance, Blake's prefaces in *Europe: A Prophecy* and *America: A Prophecy* reflect this fracturing such that not only do the individual texts struggle with the placement of the preface but the question of priority also arises *between* the texts, as they enter into a dizzying series of reciprocally prefatory relationships. Ultimately, Blake suggests that there are only ever 'false starts,' but that, consequently, the sense of error the word *false* carries has to be ejected: starting and starting imperfectly, inappropriately, or through temporal

discontinuity—so, in other words, starting traumatically, split from identity like the prophet's 'original' citation—are one and the same.<sup>119</sup>

This sense of inaugural negation is particularly overdetermined in the Preludium of *Europe*. The "nameless shadowy female" (1.1) who gives birth to the revolutionary forces of Orc seems, herself, barely to exist. If she is the figure who would "labour into life" other figures, it is also clear that this prodigality does not preserve her own life: each birth will, she laments, "cause [her] name to vanish, that [her] place may not be found" (1.9, 5). The shadowy female is "consumed" and "devoured" in her productivity, leaving her only a brief glimpse of her "fruits": "I see it smile & I roll inward & my voice is past" (1.10, 2.5, 2.16). In fact, she remarks explicitly on this exploitative economy, where production or producibility suffers abjection despite its labours:

I bring forth from my teeming bosom myriads of flames.

And thou [Enitharmon] dost stamp them with a signet, then they roam  
abroad

And leave me void as death:

Ah! I am drown'd in shady woe, and visionary joy. (2.9-12)

This female becomes the void or the negativity of a preface; she is nothing but a point of departure. In other words, she is, herself, a prelude—a (dis)embodied figure of *Europe*'s Preludium, where that introductory text is itself already divided from its beginning by *another preface*, its own, literal, 'fairy-tale' beginning. Or better, she is like Shelley's Ahasuerus, disfigured in her attempt to mediate between eternal beginning and finite starting.

This passage from *Europe* is temporally overdetermined, as it were, not only because the female's existential evacuation and the Preludium's fairy-tale preface displace the text's 'proper beginning,' but also because *Europe* (1794) is anticipated at the end of *America* (1793): "Till Angels & weak men twelve years should govern o'er the strong,/ And then their end should come, when France receiv'd the Demon's light" (*America* 16.14-15). *America* is a prophecy of a prophecy. But if such redundancy seems

<sup>119</sup> See Stanley Corngold's "Error in Paul de Man." 8.3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 489-507. Where a "mistake" is wrong an "error" is—echoing David Collings' discussion of Wordsworth—a kind of opening or opportunity. Hence, the falseness of starting could be understood as something like an error in time—but only if time itself is recognized as error.

an attempt at perfect historical synthesis—an attempt to stabilize chronology or to establish one thing as definitively precedent and another as definitively subsequent—the effect is, in fact, quite the opposite. For, once the abyss of the origin is discovered, attempts to close over such negativity look rather like self-delusions. In fact, the historical, material conditions of production suggest a significant *reversal of America's* apparent priority: for it is Blake's experience of the French Revolution that inspires his imagery and serves as the affective foundation for *America*. Hence, if *America* acts as a preface for *Europe* in terms of the order of composition and historical chronology, it is a preface that is itself *the product of* what it ostensibly anticipates, projecting its own 'beginning' into the future.<sup>120</sup> Rather than smooth temporal progression, Blake's texts seem to suspend the creative fiat in what could be described, anticipating the discussion of Schelling's historiography below, a vertiginous "rotatory movement" (*Ages* 20), leaving us with a series of preludia that do not steadily evolve into an actual system but rather perpetually displace each other, flickering in and out of existence like his shadowy female.

Indeed, Blake's prefaces tend to undermine the kind of "system completed in *Jerusalem*," where the "the apocalyptic (en)closure of history through art" follows from an "alignment between space and time," visual images and text, reminiscent of the economy of the "icon, the Book as Logos" (Rajan "System" 384). In fact, the tension between beginning and starting, aesthetically presented in Blake's prefaces, temporalizes the problem he faces when he tries to write myth as history—or in Tilottama Rajan's

---

<sup>120</sup> This offers a supporting example for David Carroll's argument about how self-reflexive representations often displace rather than complete a discourse. In the context of Jorge Luis Borges' "Chinese taxonomy" and Foucault's reading of Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, Carroll notes that "if the first step for the archeologist is to understand the rules of each epistemological 'game,' then the next step, the critical step, is to approach the point where Order itself—rather than any particular order—is in question, the point where the various orders break down and open onto alternative possibilities. The paradox of self-inclusiveness indicates that the order of all orders is also the point of disintegration of order" (56-57). In Blake's case, this insight could be carried forward from *America* and *Europe*—where the prophecy of prophecy displaces rather than consolidates narrative and historical coherence—to *Milton*, in that Blake's inclusion of himself as a character in his later text does not so much absorb alterity into a single biography or work. Rather, Blake's self-representation has both an orienting and disorienting effect. On one hand, Blake's appearance locates the text in determinate material, geographic, historical, and even physical circumstances, for Milton's star descended, as 'Blake' says, "on my left foot falling on the tarsus, [and] entered there" (*Milton* 17.50). On the other hand, the inclusion of 'Blake' displaces the name, and the poem's title, "Milton" by introducing another author. Indeed, this redundancy even undermines 'Blake's' firm footing, as it were, insofar as Miltonic inspiration—represented in the star falling on his left foot and Los' incandescent arrival—is indistinguishable from self-annihilation.

analysis, to ‘embody’ the Kristevian abject and ‘organize’ Deleuzian intensities. Rajan describes this difficulty as ontological and rhetorical catachresis, a kind of disfigured allegory, in her reading of *The [First] Book of Urizen* as illustrative of “a nomadic textuality, which survives by assuming the form of the history that disfigures it” (“System” 395).<sup>121</sup> That is, in contrast to the totalized, apocalyptic vision associated with the “Sublime Allegory”<sup>122</sup> of the illuminated book—one that neatly quarantines differences according to different ‘levels’<sup>123</sup>—the “dominant figure of the Lambeth books is [...] catachresis, a figure in which tenor and vehicle cannot be separated, the vehicle seeming at times to be its tenor” (Rajan “System” 387, 388). As Rajan explains,

[s]uffice it to say here that allegory is the figure of separation as well as of the exegetical translation of matter into spirit; catachresis, by contrast, is the figure of unreadability: it is the form taken by what Julia Kristeva calls the abject, as the state in which spirit remains glued to matter, like Los to Urizen. In abjection, which is a pre-thetic rather than synthetic identity, things cannot be separated and predication cannot occur because subject and object are confused, as are inside and outside, spirit and body.

Catachresis is the rhetorical form of abjection, because it jams together phenomena that cannot be seen in the same space and confuses the figural and literal aspects of metaphor. In a text such as *Urizen*, catachresis blocks vision (as a form of imaginative predication), because the figural is stuck to the literal, thus figuring the way that vision itself is stuck to the materiality of history. To put it differently, catachresis is the site at which these texts confront something radically inhuman, a materiality that Blake grasps as “history.” Whereas Hegel anthropomorphizes history by figuring it as a phenomenology of mind, Blake disfigures this organicism by

---

<sup>121</sup> “These texts [i.e., the Lambeth books] are caught in the impossibility of their own writing, as a process in which Blake articulates, cancels, and (dis)figures the system that he can produce only in and as its abjected parts” (Rajan “System” 385). Indeed, while in texts like “*Urizen*, *Ahania*, and *The Book of Los* [...]”, the scene of writing extends throughout the entire text,” Rajan notes how “in *Europe* and *America* this disfiguration is thematized and confined within the prelude” (“System” 385).

<sup>122</sup> In Rajan, “System,” 387, citing Erdman’s edition, 730.

<sup>123</sup> As suggested in the previous section, while there is a totalizing drive in the text it is not clear that *Milton* could be identified with “Sublime Allegory” (E 730) since its ordering exigency overlaps with a disorienting ‘project’ of self-annihilation.

grotesquely overlaying Urizen's body on the map of the world, so that the body is outside itself—as an inside that is neither inside nor outside.

("System" 388)

The prefatory fiat that betrays the beginning and inaugurates a prophetic temporality—an ambivalent trajectory split between progress and regress—constitutes a kind of temporal catachresis, a collapse of linear narrative in the very instant of time's inauguration. For *The [First] Book of Urizen* is also a kind of preface to the predicted system of the illuminated book,<sup>124</sup> one that tends however to revoke the very start toward systematicity and illumination that it seems to make.

What, after all, are the implications of Blake's decision to inaugurate *Milton* through a condensed citation of *Urizen*? In what sense, that is, is *Urizen* an 'inaugural' text? For *Urizen*, as a figure of beginning—and in this relation, another figure of Romantic prophecy—becomes dismembered, distributed, and disfigured in the very process of creation and literal organ-ization. We see this in the atomized and compartmentalized stages of his creation and in the discrete features of each moment, such that putting *Urizen* together looks very much like taking him apart. For instance, in an allusion to Eve's creation from Adam's rib, "Urizen was rent from his [Los'] side" (6.4). *Urizen* emerges through a wound that "heal'd not" (7.4), as if anticipating the struggle Los will face, subsequently, of organizing *Urizen*'s body as the substrate or material of all creation not just in the 'first book' of *Urizen* but in the subsequent books of *Urizen*, as it were, represented by *Milton*. In fact, there is another, formal or structural division in this act of creation. At the beginning of chapter Two of *Urizen*, the text introduces an abstract "solitary one in Immensity," "Urizen so nam'd" (3.43, 42). When, near the end of chapter Three, *Urizen* is torn from Los' side, this seems to be a second, conflicting genesis that is more concrete and organic than the preceding version. In this,

---

<sup>124</sup> Rajan makes a distinction between the system as a Kantian integration of parts and the illuminated book as a form of phenomenological "reduction" to essential structures, where the latter frames the former: "as the containing form of the system, the illuminated book accomplishes what the system by itself cannot. For whereas the system as verbal construct can do no more than contain difficulty—in the double sense of the word *contain*—the composite artifact of the illuminated book 'reduces' difficulty within the intricacy of a figured surface, allowing us to look rather than read, to assimilate the text as art rather than experience" (391). Put differently, the illuminated book does not so much "reduce" difficulty in the sense of diminish difficulty as *reorganize* the catachrestic intensities of the Lambeth books in a manner recalling Caruth's description of how consciousness uses narrative sequencing as a means to negotiate traumatic events without necessarily deadening their intensity. (See the discussion of trauma in chapter two.)

Blake may subtly echo the inconsistency in the Book of Genesis itself, the curious double beginning presented there: where Genesis, chapter one, describes an abstract God hovering over the void, part of the way into chapter two a second version of creation, centered on the creation of humans and the Garden of Eden, takes over the narrative. In other words, even before looking at how the body is deconstructed in its construction, Blake separates the abstract from the organic story of genesis—in a possible allusion to the Hebrew Bible—as if to insist on the negativity implicit in the ordinary claims of the traditional narrative.

Chapters four and five of *Urizen* detail the slow, almost torturous formation of Urizen at the hands of Los. In fact, the body is parcelled out even as it is welded together—

Los beat on his fetters of iron;

And heated his furnaces & pour'd

Iron odor and odor of brass (10.28-30)—

and wrapped in root-like sinews of organic tissue: “His nervous brain shot branches/ Round the branches of his heart” (11.11-12). Urizen’s formation—both a hetero- and auto-production—moves from skeletal to connective and soft tissues, and finally to the organs of sensation in a cataract of images that are only barely cauterized through the successive seven “Ages” of “dismal woe” (10.42, 43): a framework that parodies God’s creation of the cosmos in seven days. Urizen is effectively dissected, then, when the narrative details his creation with such minute particularity: from his “vast Spine” to his “Conglobing, Trembling” blood, Urizen is layered over by “ten thousand branches” of nerve fibre (10.37; 11.5, 6). These fibres are slowly wrought into sense organs: his eyes form as, plant-like, tissue climbs “on high into two little orbs,” after which forms “two Ears in close volutions” (11.13, 21). Finally, the rest of the organs—“Two Nostrils,” “his channeld Throat,” and “Tongue” (13.1, 7, 8)—grow into themselves before the final corporeal organization, the spatial orientation of the body in the world:

Enraged & stifled with torment

He [i.e., Urizen] threw his right Arm to the north

His left Arm to the south

Shooting out in anguish deep,

And his Feet stampd the nether Abyss  
 In trembling & howling & dismay. (13.12-17)

In other words, while the text seems to offer a linear pattern of successive, organic integration, the violent detail through which this development appears seems almost to segregate the organs, and the stages in which they emerge, from each other. Rather than a beautiful totality where the parts disappear seamlessly into the whole, we have here a more awkward, Frankensteinian image of a body of fragments merely conglomerated rather than subtly implicated.

Not only does the body of *Urizen* seem to dissolve in and through its very condensation but, further, the initial, abstract, pre-incarnation version of genesis insists on negativity throughout its series of phenomenal appearances. Hence, while traditional criticism on *Urizen* insists on establishing a positivity preceding creation (identified with the Eternals), one may stay closer to Blake's revolutionary thought in understanding negation and affirmation, depression and expansion, and even necessity and freedom as "identical" in Schelling's specific sense—that is, *not* as the same things, but as deeply mutually constitutive yet resistant to sublation. Specifically, the first description of creation in *Urizen* is complicated since *Urizen's* emergence into actuality follows a pattern of negations as opposed to affirmative positings. The cosmology of *Urizen's* 'birth' through the affirmation of absences, in other words, parallels irony's and the preface's negative freedom. *Urizen* is "unknown, unprolific" (3.2), and yet he is constituted through this same obscurity and reticence. That is, even in negating knowledge and production, the scaffold or possibility of knowledge and production is, at least, introduced—just as Socrates introduces the *way* to positive knowledge, though not that knowledge itself, through infinite absolute negativity.

For instance, the initial description of *Urizen*—echoing the prelude to *Europe*—as "a shadow" (3.1) or something "unseen" (3.10) marks a negation of sight that, nevertheless, introduces the possibility of vision.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, if vision is one of the first

---

<sup>125</sup> It is tempting to compare this problem with forming the image of *Urizen* and of the Shadowy Female to one of Kierkegaard's first 'images' of Socrates as a figure of disappearance: "if we now say that irony constituted the substance of his [Socrates'] existence (this is, to be sure, a contradiction, but it is supposed to be that), and if we further postulate that irony is a negative concept, it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix a picture of him—indeed, it seems impossible or at least as difficult as to picture a nisse [or elf] with the cap that makes him invisible" (*Irony* 12).

categories to emerge—negatively—as a form or structure for finite perception, then it makes sense that the poem should, itself, fall into this structure when it comes, finally, to its first positive declaration: “changes *appeared*” (3.9; my emphasis). It is telling, in other words, that changes are here reflected in terms not of being so much as of vision; the poem seems to use only the language made available to it by the order of creation described within the poem itself. The parallel emphasis on an absence of space (“void” [2.4], “vacuum” [3.5]) along with sight also makes possible this first “appearing,” as in addition to vision “appearance” implies a topology. The specific repudiation of vision and space in the opening lines of *Urizen*, then, forms a metaphysical skeleton (paralleling Urizen’s physical skeleton) onto which thought’s categories, and the phenomena they make possible, can cling.

This is very little, almost nothing. Hence, it is quite appropriate that appearing should be limited to the most basic possible form: the universe is here a two-dimensional place where not things but merely “shapes” (3.14) form Urizen’s first opponents, inaugurating “conflictions” (3.14) that, if we recall *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, imply a growing—although perhaps not yet forceful—momentum.<sup>126</sup> The pattern continues with sound. Urizen’s “silent activity” (3.18) introduces the possibility of sound. Until this point in the text there is no auditory horizon whatever. This specific, acoustical way of organizing the universe—indeed, organizing the universe through human organs—is not broached until silence is mentioned. To be sure, silence is not ‘heard’ as silent until the introduction of the auditory sense itself. The appearance of silence, in other words, opens the sphere of discourse even if silence would seem to be the least obvious emissary of language. Finally, death, the decisive image of finitude, emerges in much the same way as vision, space, and sound: “Death was not, but eternal life sprung” (3.39). In this assertion of death’s absence, life and death as oppositions emerge for the first time. Perhaps we could even say, then, that death is the “springing” of eternal life, that it is the localization of eternity that makes possible in turn a beginning, a springing point, or an *ursprung*.

This is to suggest that the poem performatively parallels the process of the creation it describes, building itself lexically and formally in tandem with the universe

---

<sup>126</sup> “Without Contraries no progression” (3)



depicted in its content. One problem with this, however, is that—as Paul Mann points out—“by (re)writing Urizen, in effect by taking Urizenic dictation, Los ob-literates and los-es himself. By binding Urizen he binds himself” (55). If language helps to generate the universe, its dialogic nature also works against any stable, simple economy of producer and product. This is most apparent in *The Book of Los*, where “Still he [Los] fell thro’ the void, still a void/ Found for falling day & night without end” (4.32 -33). This passage is particularly arresting since the syntax places “still” within a gap between “void” and “void,” as if within a kind of void between voids. Hence, we might read “still he fell” as either a continuing, eternal falling or a motionless, frozen falling—as either “he continued to fall” or “he became still.” These paradoxes culminate in what sounds like a void founded or established for the sake of falling, anticipating the ambivalent treatment of Jerusalem’s foundations—as city, spirit, and Blake’s illuminated book—discussed above in *Milton*, there described as “laid in ruins” (6.15). The text at this point, in fact, raises an interesting, larger question about how any kind of grounding works: something important to consider in preparation for the discussion, below, of Schelling’s history. For in a sense, an act of grounding *requires* groundlessness, or an abyss. Grounding is only really possible or necessary if there is no ground in the first place. As Leslie Hill, commenting on Blanchot’s abyssal thinking, puts it,

[f]or any act of foundation to be possible at all, it must first be preceded by an absence of foundation. Such prior absence is thereby a necessary condition of any possibility of foundation; however, to the extent that it insists, as it necessarily must, on the belatedness and fragility of any such moment of foundation, any such condition of possibility is also a condition of impossibility. The laying of foundations, as it were, is an activity that may take place only within a bottomless abyss; and it is the bottomless abyss that constitutes the only reliable foundation, albeit a foundation that is always already an absence of foundation. (55-56)

This Blanchotian, Blakean, and ruinous foundation mirrors the working and unworking of Schelling’s “rotary wholes” (92): points of circulation and condensation that, as Rajan notes, represent “both the production of new forms in ‘discontent,’ and the rotation

around their own foundations that perpetually unworks these wholes by returning them to the annular drive in which they have their origin” (“Psychoanalysis” §29).

In fact, this groundlessness or *abgrund* transects every actual instance of grounding, as any consideration of the initial act—the start’s reference to the beginning—recalls that the condition for the possibility of that grounding is the impossibility of grounding, or the abyss. Or, just as the abyss makes (a provisional kind of) grounding possible, it also makes perfect, total, or complete grounding impossible. This parallels the logic of beginning discussed above, in that beginning is something like the temporal abyss of such (im)possibility. Hence, in *Urizen*, as a book detailing the beginning of all things, including knowledge and the knowable, the incomprehensibility that is the condition of possibility for interpretation perpetually returns like the repressed or insists across the entire surface of the work, like Ahasuerus’ scar. We see here in fact a concept of origin akin to Schelling’s contradiction-as-origin, as well as a refusal to ignore the *abgrund* no matter how disconcerting it might be. So, whereas, in Geoffrey Hartman’s words, “the Bible’s ‘in the beginning’ [is] a limiting concept, which tells us not to think about what went before” (*Criticism* 119), Blake’s Book of Genesis, in contrast, relentlessly calls attention to its ‘founding’ contradiction. In its role as an inaugurating book, *Urizen* thus seems to complicate the division of labour between preface and work. That is, the preface seems in some sense to un-work the work or to represent what Blanchot calls the work of the absence of (the) work: not merely non-work, but the *work of non-work*. Indeed, Blanchot goes so far as to see the workless preface as something like the exemplary ‘work’ of Romanticism:

*Romanticism, it is true, ends badly, but this is because it is essentially what begins and what cannot but finish badly: an end that is called suicide, madness, loss, forgetting. And certainly it is often without works, but this is because it is the work of the absence of (the) work; a poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act, an affirmation without duration, a freedom without realization, a force that exalts in disappearing and that is in no way discredited if it leaves no trace, for this was its goal: to make poetry shine, neither as nature nor even as work, but as pure consciousness of the moment. (*Infinite* 352-353, my emphasis)*

For worklessness is neither work nor non-work, but rather the work of idleness, a 'project' that works at its very deconstitution as a project, just as Bataille says of his *Inner Experience*: "the opposition to the idea of project—which takes up an essential part of this book—is so necessary within me that having written the detailed plan for this introduction, I can no longer hold myself to it" (6). Hence, the negativity of self-annihilation formalized as the absolute preface in Blake's *Milton* begins to look like Bataille's *Inner Experience*—an abject project—and Schelling's strange picture of history in *Ages of the World*, a history trapped in the preface to history. That is, if Los is Blake's "Eternal Prophet" (*Urizen* 10.17; *Jerusalem* 75.7),<sup>127</sup> *Milton* remains divided between his organizing work and *Urizen*'s disorganizing pre-face, the project of prophetic apocalypse suspended by *Urizen*'s ambivalent dialectic of self-generation and self-destruction. A closer look at Blake's treatment of time as both an organizing and disorganizing apparatus helps to justify this philosophical company. For, just as Blake's appeal to temporal simultaneity seems also to reveal time's immanent self-difference, so does Schelling's appeal to temporal simultaneity in an effort to ameliorate the ontological and epistemological contradictions that attend the Godhead's revelation in actual history prove more problematic than he might have anticipated.

### III. "Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged": Schelling's Past

The division between the preface and the work proper, like that between the beginning and the start, represents an effort at dividing labour. What Blake's *Milton* suggests is that while such division is ideal—this seems to be the gist of the Bard's cautionary parable—nevertheless the lines of demarcation prove unstable and perhaps positively disorienting. For if the preface and prefatory materials are supposed to form the foundation for the start of the work, these same materials actually dissolve and suspend linear development at the same time. Like the irreducible ambivalence of Romantic prophecy, where prediction is coextensive with the unpredictability to which it responds, the preface both invokes and revokes the work to come. That is, the preface in Blake, as Kierkegaard says in his little-studied *Prefaces*, "does not run errands on behalf

---

<sup>127</sup> In *Milton* Los is called "the Prophet of Eternity" (7.38).

of the system” (6): the preface becomes absolute.<sup>128</sup> Rather than simply introducing the work, the preface under this aspect enters onto a regressive course, such that prefaces preface only other prefaces, the work’s foundations repeatedly “laid in ruins.”<sup>129</sup> In an effort to combine Blake’s treatment of labour and Bataille’s distinction between restricted and general economy, this absolute preface could be read as an example of what Blanchot, noted above, calls the work of the absence of (the) work.<sup>130</sup> That is, a closer look at how the preface invites abyssal regression reveals that it exacerbates rather than ameliorates the gap between the preface and the work proper. If the division of labour according to a preface/work opposition is supposed to enhance productivity and

<sup>128</sup> As Todd Nichol suggest, Kierkegaard’s short text, *Prefaces* (1844), “continues in comic mode the attack on Danish Hegelianism initiated in earlier works and soon to be more fully developed in *Stages and Postscript*” (xi). That is, in Neils Thulstrup’s words, *Prefaces* “showed the comical aspect of [Hegel’s] energetic system building” (366) since these prefaces, authored by Kierkegaard’s “Nicolas Notabene,” stand alone, as if dwelling on the very inessentiality Hegel ascribed to the preface in his own “Preface” to the *Phenomenology*. For as Notabene notes well in the preface to *Prefaces*, “the preface as such, the liberated preface” is his chosen genre. This is a type of writing that “must then have no subject to treat but must deal with nothing, and insofar as it seems to discuss something and deal with something, this must nevertheless be an illusion and fictitious motion” (5). In other words, Notabene’s book of liberated prefaces, a collection of prefaces to books that do not exist, is not put to work but, rather, foregrounds the recalcitrant worklessness of the preface in order subtly to undermine Hegel’s confidence in rational systematicity: for Hegel’s conversion or sublimation of Kantian, static antinomy into dialectical *Bildung* merely reorganizes what remains a deep belief in reality’s ultimate rationality and cognizability. Kierkegaard performs his critique, in other words, simply by insisting on and agreeing with Hegel’s own insight.

<sup>129</sup> It is easy to overlook that this phrase must be taken in a truly ambivalent sense—that is, not merely as the rejection of foundation but as the exposure of the foundational exigency. The attempt to establish foundations remains insistent even if an abyss perpetually displaces actual foundation.

<sup>130</sup> In “Literature and the Original Experience,” a long essay in the middle of *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot describes literature’s beginning as just this kind of absolute preface, one that suspends the work to come in perpetual anticipation: “the work says this word, beginning, and what it *claims to give to history is initiative, the possibility of a point of departure. But for its own part it does not begin.* It is always anterior to any beginning, it is always already finished. As soon as the truth one thinks one draws from it comes to light, becomes the life and the action of daytime’s clarity, the work closes off on itself as if it were a foreigner to this truth and without significance” (228-229, my emphasis). In other words, Blanchot sees an insuperable gap between the work’s infinite power to initiate and its limited incarnation in a particular work—a dualism that repeats Kierkegaard’s description of Socrates as pure initiation without positive content, a beginning that does not itself become absorbed by the start of any project. The reticence of the beginning resists the work’s reduction of negation to “*determinate negation*,” a form of finitude that facilitates “the transition [...] by which the progress through the complete succession of forms comes about of itself” (*Phenomenology* 48). Blanchot reformulates the work’s negativity not by denying the dialectical unfolding of spirit or the existence of particular works or projects, but by turning the work into the very absence of the work, by putting the work to work *at* worklessness. This is something we have already seen performed in Blake and Kierkegaard as each dwells on a mode of inauguration that is not simply the start of a project but rather precisely the suspension of anything like a complete work. The preface in Blake and Kierkegaard *is* the work of the absence of (the) work that Blanchot describes. For, as Blanchot insist, the work’s becoming absent relies on a return to its own origin not as what is most proper to it but as a radical exclusion: “the work says the wor[d] *beginning*,” and yet “in itself it remains mysterious, excluded from the initiation and exiled from the clear truth” (229).

efficiency, what happens, in fact, is that prefatory negativity infects labour itself with a form of negativity resistant to dialectical *Bildung*. The preface, ironically, prevents the work from getting to work. The absolute preface—or the preface under its abyssal aspect—performs the work of work's absence, where this means neither work nor non-work, but the work of idleness, putting work to work in worklessness.<sup>131</sup>

*Milton's* fraught relationship to its own originating materials displaces the work of mourning, redemption, and illumination. That is, on one hand, the text actively and explicitly pursues apocalyptic vision through a restricted economy of expenditure. On the other hand, the text blurs the division of labour it thematizes. Blake's treatment of time, specifically, offers a way to read this self-conflicting gesture as a case study in Romantic prophecy. As with the other modes of textual and conceptual ordering—mapping, biography, autobiography, prefacing, *et cetera*—Blake's prophetic mode reformulates not merely the subject's experience of or relation to time: additionally, Blake reimagines and reconceptualizes time itself. For if time, taken as narrative regularity, can in some cases be understood as a way to mitigate traumatic negativity by putting it to work in mourning, Blake does not in fact allow time to become completely identical to narrative. That is, if Blake will call time "the mercy of Eternity" (24.72), this form of comfort is also a delusion of Beulah. In fact, Schelling's treatment of time as an organizing schema in *Ages of the World* supplements Blake's discussion, in *Milton*. For like Blake's Major Prophecies, *Ages* aspires to a total picture of history and is structured according to a predictive model of past, present, and future. Moreover, it seems to elaborate, in its content, a concept of time amenable to the restricted economy of prediction that is supposed to lead to God's historical revelation. However, Schelling's text reveals a persistent counterplot where time's ability to ameliorate onto-theological contradictions proves, in fact, to intensify those contradictions.

---

<sup>131</sup> This is something Rajan gestures toward in her discussion of Blake as a labourer, noting that "the extraordinary coherence of the early texts at the level of the issues they address allows us to speak of Blake's 'work' in the sense of labour. But their stylistic diversity complicates any attempt to naturalize perspective by abstracting what is said from how it is said, and thus to make labour yield a 'work' in the classic sense of a finished product" (214). Further, she argues, "labour suggests an attempt to produce something, a belief, in the value of what one is doing as an activity if not as something that continuously corresponds to truth. But labour does not necessarily result in progress, except in very local ways: hence the early Blake's arrangement of his text in a nonlinear array that prevents the reading process from becoming complacently teleological" (214-215). One could compare the notion of the work of the absence of (the) work to this sense of labour.

The three ages of Schelling's *Ages of the World* never resolve themselves into an unproblematic narrative of progression despite the implicit promise of coherence and totality contained in the past, present, future structure into which his project, in the Introduction, is broken. Specifically, Schelling parallels forms of knowing and means of expression with these ages: "the past is known, the present is discerned, the future is intimated. The known is narrated, the discerned is presented, the intimated is prophesied" (xxxv). This tidy logic that, again, treats prophecy as a form of prediction and reinforces a broader sense of coherence amongst temporalities, seems, however, to become very complicated—perhaps totally undermined—as Schelling explores the past and questions of first principles, beings' origins, and God's ground. Ultimately, to what extent can "the known" or "narration" apply to the past when the beginning is a form of intense negativity? For "the beginning," says Schelling, "really only lies in the negation. [...]. It is a negation of the starting point and the actually emerging moment is an overcoming of this negation [...]. Negation is [...] the necessary precedent (*prius*) of every movement. [...]. What wants to grow must foreshorten itself and hence, negation is the first transition whatsoever from nothing to something" (16). In fact, later in the text this past is characterized not as the "known" but, rather, as precisely what is *unknown*: "there is no dawning of consciousness (and precisely for this reason no consciousness) without positing something past. There is no consciousness without something that is at the same time excluded and contracted" (44). Indeed, "left to itself, nature would still lead everything back into that state of utter negation" (31). Hence, the past, as the ground of consciousness—as something that is absolutely past in the sense that it was never once present, ever—is unconscious, even as it enables knowledge and, in fact, forestalls God's psychosis by sublimating the ground that He contains but is non-identical with. In other words, in the preface to Schelling's *Ages* the text projects a linear historical and narrative ordering in terms that imply a regular progression from past to present to future; however, when it comes to unfolding the text proper, consciousness seems unable to move forward, as it does so confidently in Hegel, or elude entirely the possibility of regression.

Yet, early on, Schelling cleaves to the promise of total vision, imagining a future when something like Blake's illuminated book will successfully marry the subjective and

objective worlds in a positive philosophy of revelation. In his own preface to the First Book, “The Past,” Schelling speaks quite confidently that his text “contains some preparation for that future objective presentation of science” (xl). At the same time, with a curious sort of hesitation, Schelling describes the unification as something messianically to-come when he muses, “perhaps the one is still coming who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, what will be. But this time has not yet come” (xl). Like the conventional reading of *Milton*’s timeframe, Schelling places his own work in the instant immediately preceding apocalypse. Yet, upon closer inspection this instant, as in Blake’s text, seems not to be as pregnant as initially supposed. Just as *Milton*’s additive and organizing exigency displaces total vision or perfect redemption—for if Milton redeems himself it is not by achieving a unified or greater selfhood but precisely by entering into the state of radical re-stating—so too does Schelling’s effort to unify “the world of thought and the world of actuality” (xl) suggest that that unification is always only a ‘provisional’ arrangement, in the double sense of prophetically “intimated” rather than knowingly “narrated” but also temporary rather than permanent. That is, Schelling finds it impossible to follow his initial plan, becoming, rather, trapped in the beginning. Failing to ‘work out’ (from) its own age, the book of “The Past”—or what could be called Schelling’s absolute preface to absolute history—infects with worklessness the prospect of the “recollection of the primordial beginning of things” through a reading of “history according to its external forms” (xxxix), the philosophy of revelation.

For instance, Jason Wirth points out that “Schelling composed multitudinous versions of *Die Weltalter*, including numerous versions of the first book (*The Past*)”—there were, in fact, “more than twelve quite different handwritten versions of the first book” (vii). At the level of textual production, this difficulty with beginning the system recalls Blake’s Lambeth period. But it also, and more importantly, performs materially the kind of “rotatory movement” (20) Schelling describes as the (an)archaic ‘foundation’ of all existence. For Schelling, “the first nature is, with regard to itself, in contradiction” (12). This is because there are three, mutually excluding original forces or “potencies” (11)—recalling Rajan’s description of Blake’s characters as Deleuzian intensities—that constitute the primordial scene, as it were, of metaphysics. For there to be any kind of

development—indeed, for there to be something rather than nothing—Schelling supposes that there must be an original opposition, an originary difference that would create the conditions *for* differentiation and therefore knowledge.<sup>132</sup> Based on the three-fold nature of God as [1]“the outpouring, outstretching, self-giving being, [...] [2] an equivalently eternal force of selfhood, of retreat into itself, of Being in itself” (6), and [3] the unity of these two principles, Schelling offers a triadic model of “the eternal Yes,” the “eternal No,” and a “third term or the unity of the Yes and the No” (11).

While each of these potencies “has the same claim to be that which has being” (10)—a claim that would necessarily be made against the claim of the other two—this does not preclude establishing a necessary pattern or order of displacement. While the potencies are “equipotent,” nevertheless “a Before and an After,” a “prior and posterior [...] between the forces” (33) must emerge, otherwise there would be nothing but eternal, homogenised stasis—something denied by human experience. Like the strangely “unprolific” (*Urizen* 3.2) offering that inaugurates *Urizen*—a negativity that spreads, in fact, throughout Blake’s corpus via various prefaces—Schelling argues that “the beginning only really lies in the negation,” where negativity is understood as “not a mere feebleness or lack in the being, but active negation” (16, 32): “that God negates itself, restricts its being, and withdraws into itself, is the eternal force and might of God” (15).<sup>133</sup> Yet, if negation is in this primordial ‘position,’ it seems that this ensures that all

<sup>132</sup> Knowledge, somewhat counterintuitively, relies on a radical contradiction between subject and object—a contradiction that knowledge’s mediation does not eliminate but rather ameliorates through “a closer determination” (75) of that contradiction. For if knowledge collapses into the object it seeks to know, “if the visionary [individual] lacks this [mediating, dialectical] organ or intentionally pushes it away from themselves in order to speak immediately from vision, then they lose their necessary standard and are one with the object and, for any third person, they are like the object itself” (xxxviii). Whatever the visionary comes to ‘know’ in this way he or she knows “without, however, being certain of it” since the visionary is unable “to hold it steadily in front of” him or herself (xxxviii-xxxix).

<sup>133</sup> Harold Bloom’s description of God according to Jewish mystical traditions suggests something of the deep affinity in Schelling’s work with certain Kabbalistic doctrines:

In a perfectly, I think, Kabbalistic way [...] Yahweh may have come into existence by this act of *Zimzum*, this act of contraction or withdrawal, which means that he diminished himself in order to get started. Which I find fascinatingly parallel to Walt Whitman, in which I again follow Scholem: who used to say in conversations with me, that in a secular world somehow Whitman by some miracle without knowing anything about Kabbalah had in effect reinvented his own Kabbalah, and I think that is true. Whitman throughout *Song of Myself* and elsewhere is always saying that he is expanding, that he is getting to contain more and more multitudes, that his sense of self is steadily increasing. But in fact he too is always contracting and withdrawing. He is endlessly elusive and evasive, and the worlds that he creates and ruins also seem to come from some process of self-withdrawal.



evolution or development will progress only insofar as it remains susceptible to regression, that Schelling's foundations are, like Jerusalem's, "laid in ruins." So, if the order of the potencies can be established as the No, the Yes, and the unity of No and Yes, Schelling bends this line of progressive amelioration into a circle: "that originary, necessary, and abiding life hence ascends from the lowest to the highest. Yet when it has arrived at the highest, it retreats immediately back to the beginning in order again to ascend from it" (19). What follows is a picture of chaos. For the "unremitting movement that goes back into itself and recommences" (21) constitutes an "annular drive," an ongoing contest between each potency's *mere being* and each potency's desire to *have being*,<sup>134</sup> wherein

[t]here is only an unremitting wheel, a rotatory movement that never comes to a standstill and in which there is no differentiation. Even the concept of the beginning, as well as the concept of the end, again sublimates itself in this circulation. There is certainly a beginning of the potency in accordance with its inherent possibility, but this is not an actual beginning. An actual beginning is only one that posits itself as not having being in relationship to that which should actually be. But that which could be the beginning in this movement does not discern itself as the beginning and makes an equal claim with the other principles to be that which has being. (20)

Recalling the tidal rhythms of Shelley's *Hellas* and *Triumph of Life* as well as Blake's serial prefacing (where earlier works become prefaces retroactively), nature for Schelling acts as "an allegory of this perpetually advancing and retreating movement" (21): "one generation comes, the other goes. Nature goes through the trouble to develop qualities, aspects, works, and talents to their pinnacle, only again to bury them for centuries in oblivion, and then start anew" (21).

Nevertheless, as the progressivism of his Introduction suggests, Schelling attempts to illustrate how historical, actual progression finally breaks from the orbit of this annular drive. In this, he develops a concept of existential temporalities that emerge

---

<sup>134</sup> Schelling frequently distinguishes between "mere Being," or being in itself, and "having being" in the sense of an existent being (22-23). Mere being, or pure being, is an "intermediate" (64) concept, in that it generates a third option between the extremes of having being and nothingness.

through the agency of the eternal Godhead—temporalities that, as in Koselleck's analysis, will fracture the purely cyclical concept of revolution. That is, "the blind obsession and craving of the first [nature] only grows silent before something higher" (22). This "Other that is outside" the "insensate movement" (23) of rotation is able to convince the potencies to abate since it offers a state of being that is more attractive. The Godhead's strange ontological status as "that which in itself neither has being nor does not have being" offers, specifically, an image of blissful "pure equivalence (indifference)"—that is, not passivity or ignorance but a kind of distilled calmness, a "will that wills nothing" and therefore does not suffer (24). Indeed, the Godhead acts as a salve: "that which is higher, magically, so to speak, rouses in that life [i.e., the "eternally commencing" life of the potencies] the yearning for freedom. The obsession [*Sucht*] abates into yearning [*Sehnsucht*], wild desire turns into a yearning to ally itself, as if it were its own true or highest self, with the will that wills nothing, with eternal freedom" (28). Put differently, the Godhead performs a cut and projects—or perhaps abjects—the potencies, creating in this instant the distinction between God's ground as nature and God's freedom as spirit. This distinction is also essentially temporal. The Godhead puts the cyclical itinerary of the annular drive into the past, into the unconscious, absolute prehistory of history: a past that was never present even once, since it remains anterior to any kind of narrative or historical development of consciousness. At the same time this scission opens up an absolute future. Like Ahasuerus' 'figure' of the future in *Hellas*, this is a future always to-come. In contrast to the compulsive existence of the annular drive, "yearning nature has in itself the possibility to come to Being, to subject [...], to the stuff of actualization" (28); and yet the future in which this possibility glimpses its own actuality remains, at this point, purely formal.

"How the pure Godhead, in itself neither having being nor not having being, can have being is the question of all the ages" (40). That is, the question of how the Godhead can be both indifferent and actual at the same time is a question that the temporal division into eternal and yet differentiated ages helps to explain. Schelling argues that it is not at all paradoxical to suggest that different times exist, in their difference from one another, at the same time. That is, time for Schelling is problematically related to representation, as he hints at in his turn, near the 'conclusion' of *Ages*, toward the positive philosophy.

For instance, time is understood to *contain* eternity rather than to be time's outside or other: "the true eternity does not exclude all time but rather contains time (eternal time) subjugated within itself. Actual eternity is the overcoming of time" (43); "it is not empty (abstract) eternity, but that which contains time subjugated within itself" (44). Eternity is not merely separated from time here but includes and exceeds time. Hence, it is not absurd to refer to the negating potency as "eternal beginning" (17) for Schelling, as the eternal is now a modification of what is an essentially temporal predicament. The eternal—God Himself—can have a beginning in the sense of a qualitative distinction from its present or future. And yet that beginning is never or was never completely *within* time. That is, there is a beginning that is eternal in the sense that it would, from time's point of view, span and include all punctual instants—just as the beginning opposed, above, to particular starts spans, includes, but is not reducible to such starts since it is their condition of possibility. This is close to how Blake imagines the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal. For, as Isaiah says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, from the right perspective he "discover'd the infinite in every thing" (12.9).

Time is especially important in Schelling for how it helps to navigate the ontological conflicts in God's historical revelation. That is, we reach "the highest conceivable contradiction" (75), says Schelling, as God, if He is to reveal Himself, must accord being both to the Yes and the No—God's power of positive revelation and His power to abstain from the limitations that attend any determination—at the same time: a blatant contradiction that can be ameliorated "only through a closer determination of it" (75). In other words, the Absolute can *have being* simultaneously as "the No and the Yes" if "one of them is prior, as ground, and the other is posterior, as grounded" (76).<sup>135</sup> In this reasoning, the No is the ground of the Yes or is the abyssal (un)grounding that is the condition for any grounding whatever. Hence, if "God as the Yes and God as the No cannot have being *at the same time*" (76, Schelling's emphasis), God can have His being as both at different times—and *these different times can exist simultaneously*: "if A is posited, then B must simply still persist *as the prior*, and hence, in such a way, that they

<sup>135</sup> This ability to have being in these two different modes is something denied earlier in *Ages*. This denial is responsible for the torturous rotatory motion of the potencies, as each struggles, in the primordial beginning, against the others to secure its own exclusive being—until, as noted, the pain is converted into a more diffuse "yearning" in the voluntary renunciation of desire in the face of the Godhead.

are nonetheless at the same time, *in different times*" (76, Schelling's emphasis). Hence, in the words of *Milton*, for Schelling "Time is the mercy of Eternity; without Times swiftness/ Which is the swiftness of all things: all were eternal torment" (24.72-73).

Treating time this way means that the Yes gains a degree of consistency or stability, although it is never completely free from the dissolving ground of the No. Indeed, Schelling refers to the same physiological process as Blake in order to describe this organization of the negative and positive into past and future: namely, pulsation. That is, both Schelling and Blake seem to rewrite God's ontology as human physiology, in effect incarnating eternity. Yet, Schelling's use of the analogy differs from Blake's and helps to expose the emptiness of what might seem to be an apocalyptic a-temporality. Blake, for instance, condenses all history into a single spasm:

For in this Period the Poet's Work is Done: and all the Great  
Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period  
Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery. (29.1-3)

However, as Schelling's closer consideration of pulsation illustrates, it is impossible to invoke such a process as an image of perfect totality since the heart's rhythm involves two equipotent, opposed, though sequentially ordered forces. Hence, for Schelling the temporal organization of the potencies into a prior and a posterior

can be represented as a systole and a diastole. This is a completely involuntary movement that, once begun, makes itself from itself. The recommencing, the re-ascending is systole, tension that reaches its acme in the third potency. The retreat to the first potency is diastole, slackening, upon which a new contraction immediately follows. Hence, this is the first pulse, the beginning of that alternating movement that goes through the entirety of visible nature, of the eternal contraction and the eternal re-expansion, of the universal ebb and flow. (21)

In other words, Blake's appeal to a pulmonary temporality to 'organize' the history of his artistic work, similar to his effort in *Urizen*, cannot be successfully totalizing, at least not in the mode of apocalypse. Like other attempts in *Milton* to order its prefatory materials—"for each matter only flourishes when it is in its place" (*Ages* 29)—it seems

that the image of pulsation, while suggesting a literally vital historical synthesis, works actively against apocalyptic arrest.

But does this mean that Schelling's organization of time manages to determine more closely the kinds of contradictions he and Blake identify, respectively, between nature and spirit or finite sense and infinite perception? The fact is that Schelling's description of different times remains problematic. For in what sense can something be said to *have being* when the condition in which it can have that being is, say, the past or the future—that is, a condition that itself *does not have being*?<sup>136</sup> In fact, the having-being of the No *is* being's negation: the No has its being as that which dissolves being. So, if time allows God to move out of pure indifference, the actuality of the Yes is countered by the activated negation of the No. The goal will not be, then, to find a way for the No and the Yes to *have being* at the same time, since the No really never has being, or its having-being is identical to its essence as the negation of determinate existence. Rather, the aim is to think of a way to place the No and Yes into a relation that does not instantly deteriorate into contradiction, something Schelling hints at when he overlaps temporal succession with the logic of the "ground" and "grounded." Time is a way to insulate the Yes from the corrosive power of the No without necessarily separating the two: hence, the past becomes the (un)ground of the future. Time offers Schelling a way to quarantine the No from the Yes, to elude the perpetual suspension of the actual that becomes the essence of Kierkegaard's irony, as discussed above, when the No 'has being' as active negation, such that the positive unfolding of the Godhead (the Yes) is not immediately annulled. The No, then, is not simply past (for it never was in the present, never made past by time's passage) but is in an absolute past or is always already past. And yet, this past keeps pace (as it were) with the Yes of the present: the No is distinct from but never more or less distant, as it were, from the Yes. Again, as the ground-grounded logic suggests, the two terms maintain a somewhat steady relationship. Hence, with the concept of "different times" Schelling can imagine the Absolute as assuming being in all its forms—even if those forms are mutually cancelling—at the same time, because the different times, in which the Absolute has different forms of being, are, themselves,

---

<sup>136</sup> "One can speak of the Being of what has being (presence) and the being of what does not, *strictu sensu*, 'have' being," namely, "the past, the future" (Wirth xxxi).

“different, at the same time, nay, to speak more accurately, they [i.e., the different times and, *ergo*, the forms of being in those times] are necessarily at the same time” (76).

This problem of temporality’s coordination with actuality and possibility finds another mode of expression in Schelling’s attempt to unify and yet compartmentalize God through the process of historicization. As Rajan notes, “Schelling’s sense of history in the 1813 *Ages*, as a process of ‘constantly re-embod[y]’ ‘archetypes’ that are visions of ‘the innermost thoughts of God’ and ‘visions of future things’” continues in the 1815 version as well (“Psychoanalysis” §7).<sup>137</sup> For instance, toward the beginning of Part B—a section that recurs to the beginning of Part A in an effort to detail more clearly the “life of the individual potency” (55)—Schelling describes a deep connectivity between the opposed forces, suggesting that even within the primordial night of contraction there is something that reaches out and “seeks in a natural way to attract its higher self” (56). However, Schelling has, with a somewhat Blakean exuberance, overdetermined his dialectic of forces; as in *Milton*, there is an almost hyper-organization where each particular organ seems to determine the text absolutely—in the sense of unconditionally—such that the work never quite merges into one body.<sup>138</sup> For instance, the negating potency develops psychoanalytically into the unconscious, the grounding alterity that is abjected in the moment that consciousness emerges: “there is no dawning of consciousness (and precisely for this reason no consciousness) without positing something past. There is no consciousness without something that is at the same time

<sup>137</sup> Rajan also gestures to the philosophical background of the key terms: “the idea of the prototype or ectype derives from Jean-Baptiste Robinet’s post-Spinozist *De la Nature*, which sees nature as a historical process of working out an original ‘prototype’ through time, although Robinet is arguably less anthropological than his successors” (“Psychoanalysis,” §7).

<sup>138</sup> Here I have in mind Rajan’s description of unconditional thought as a way of (dis)organizing positive sciences or of introducing what she calls, following Foucault, a “counterscience” (“Psychoanalysis” §6) that would perform a critical function—in Kant’s sense—by exposing the limitations that particular “fields” might, counter-intuitively, impose on thought:

As Hegel argues, positive sciences are sciences that do not recognize their concepts as finite, as capable of being unbalanced by their “transition into another sphere” (*Encyclopedia* 54). They are thus constituted as what Pierre Bourdieu calls “fields,” with their own self-confirming rules and “regularities,” their own “network” of “objective relations between positions” within which a particular kind of “capital is . . . efficacious” (94-114). Absolute knowledge, by contrast, is not total but unconditional knowledge, the following of a particular direction or connection for its own sake, without regard for its potential to “derange” the whole (Schelling, *First Outline* 26). Thus in *Ages* Schelling gives geology an “archeological” role (in Foucault’s sense) in the science of nature, even at the cost of disturbing a *Naturphilosophie* through which philosophy had colonized Nature as a region of spirit. (Rajan, “Psychoanalysis,” §3)

excluded and contracted” (44). In other words, we move with this psychology into history, for “the unconscious is posited as the *past* of consciousness” (44, my emphasis). On top of this determination, Schelling will also formulate his distinction between spirit and nature: “in nature, the spirit knows itself as the one who *was* because it posits nature as its *eternal past*” (45). Thus, the unity of the whole will demand quilting points that function in these different though overlapping registers. Hence, the language of “types”: for this process offers a model for temporal sedimentation applicable in both psychological and geological realms. Indeed, this language marks Schelling’s attempt to return to the predictive prophecy of his Introduction.

In an effort to propel history out of the past, Schelling argues that something like the future inheres within primordial negation in the form of a possibility or prototype: “the soul, awakening from the depths of the unconscious, does not accomplish its graduated course without higher guidance. For already in its first awakening it is deeply stirred by the dark intimation that its actual model is in the world of spirits” (59). That is, Schelling casts the differentiated ages of the world into a scene of desire where “everything prototypical” is “pulled toward its ectype” as if “through a natural and irresistible inclination” (59). In a strange way, this regressive trajectory becomes, ultimately, progressive. For if “the higher order ( $A^2$ ) is pulled toward nature [i.e.,  $A^1$ ], it is pulled away in the same proportion from its superior order (from the  $A^3$ )” (59). The prototype’s attraction to its ‘earlier’ self generates, out of this very regression, a coincident progression by disclosing and activating the attraction of its own higher potency. Like the legs of John Donne’s compass, when one potency retreats its prototype inclines toward it sympathetically. In essence, Schelling repeats the logic of the 1813 version where “history develops unproblematically through nature as a ‘ladder of formations’ that is still conceived as a prophetic poem, in which the ‘creative spirit’ sees the ‘spirits of things’ and ‘make[s] them corporeal’ so as to ‘unfold a complete image of the future world’ (154)” (Rajan “Psychoanalysis” §8). This movement is like that encountered in “Tintern Abbey.” When Wordsworth grafts the recollection of his earlier self onto Dorothy, he suddenly embodies his own future, leaping forward in the same instant as looking backward, finding a prototype in his own ectype. With this rhythm, where history ascends through spiritual peristalsis, the Godhead, Schelling notes,

“beh[olds], as if in a glimpse or vision, the entire ladder of future formations” (59). However, a closer look at this “ladder” suggests that there is some doubt about the transition from possibility to actuality. This, in turn, casts doubt on the predictive sense of prophecy as an attempt to totalize history.

The predictive sedimentation of types begins to unravel “in the being of the second potency or of that which is the substratum of the spirit world” (64). Looking more closely at how the ages are ordered “typically,” Schelling notes,

[a]s the spirit world is the prototype of nature and all things of this external world are depictions of what nature beheld in the inner world, so, in turn, that universal soul is the immediate prototype of that which is creating the spirit world. What is thereby produced in the spirit world is just the ectype, or what is actual, of that which lay in the universal soul as prototypical or possible. (65)

In other words, nature is the ectype of the spirit world. From the perspective of nature, the spirit world is prototypically embedded in nature and allows nature to reach forward, through obscure prophetic signs, to its higher possibility. At the same time, the spirit world is the ectype of the universal soul. From the perspective of the spirit world, the universal soul is prototypically embedded in the spirit world. The spirit world is the actuality of the universal soul just as the universal soul is the possibility of the spirit world. Similarly, nature is the actuality of the spirit world just as the spirit world is the possibility of nature. Hence, the middle term or the spirit world is, under one aspect, the *prototype* of nature, a mere *possibility* toward which nature tends. Under another aspect, however, the same spirit world is the *ectype* of the universal soul, is the *actuality* that grounds the possible. Put more starkly, this means that the middle, mediating term or  $A^2$  located between nature ( $A^1$ : necessity, unconscious, past) and the Godhead ( $A^3$ : possibility, knowledge, future) *turns out to be actual and possible at different times, at the same time.*

Indeed, this uncanny, double identification of the “intermediate” (64) concept circles back to the problem, noted above, of different times, where the past and future—as dimensions that do not have being—are, strangely, supposed to enable God to have being in different, contradictory ways in different times, while those different times



themselves exist at the same time. For Schelling, in what seems like a desperate effort to ensure the possibility of a transition from negative to positive philosophy, suddenly reverses the alignment of ectype-actuality and prototype-possibility. As if passing through the Blakean vortex of the second potency's ambivalent mediation as *both* actual and possible, Schelling recasts the moment as *neither* actual *nor* possible. In this way, Schelling seems to project *actuality* into the future while at the same time retaining the notion that the future is embedded in the present and past *as* actuality. That is, returning to his distinction between having and not having being, Schelling argues that the "initial life of blind necessity," or the torturous rotation of the potencies, "could not be said to have being because it never actually attained continuance, Being, but rather just remained in striving and desire for Being" (48). This is a surprising statement since, as noted, it seems to turn the actuality of the spirit world's ectype—that is, nature—into a prototype. To model this again on "Tintern Abbey": just as Dorothy begins as William's ectype only to turn William into his own prototype—to synthesize William's possible future with his present actuality—so does the Godhead's indifference, which had initially been considered the purest possibility, begin to look like the only kind of actuality. Ultimately, the *condition of actuality* in which the prototype is supposed to reside, as a possibility, seems itself to become *prototypical* in the face of a *prototype* that has been re-determined as what is most *actual*. Again, prophecy seems to announce the future in an irreducibly ambivalent manner that, as in this case, *revokes* the present as much as it *predicts* actuality.

The notion of different times means God can *have being* and yet maintain the freedom of *neither having nor not having being*, insofar as time distances and gathers these contradictory positions together. This concept, however, undermines what had been, in Schelling's Introduction to *Ages*, a very uniform trajectory from past, to present, to future. For, if what potentially has being—God's historical revelation—is posited prophetically in the future, then it is posited as being and not being at the same time. This is because the future itself seems determined as not-having-being and yet also as the only dimension wherein being achieves the continuity necessary to claim actuality. What started as a prophetic itinerary following a restricted economy of prediction begins to look, in other words, increasingly and irreducibly ambivalent. The simultaneity within

difference or the difference within simultaneity that the concept of different times is supposed to offer as a way through the *aporia* of God's dual nature as both necessary and yet also "the most voluntaristic being" (5), reveals a schizophrenic ontological condition. For, if God can *have* being in mutually exclusive ways only within a system of order (time) that cannot, itself, claim anything but *mere* being, this seems to make prophecy as prediction look remarkably similar to Blanchot's prophecy: the retraction of actuality and presence. Indeed, a closer look at how these ages are supposed to be embedded in each other revealed that, within the very tissue of prophetic connectivity—that is, within the logic of ectype and prototype—the possibility usually associated with the future reverses position with the past's usual association with actuality. Intensifying the ambivalence of his appeal to different times, Schelling's prophetic prototype becomes indistinguishable from ectypal regression, such that the actuality of God's revelation in the future can be confirmed only insofar as this assurance revokes nature's actuality, or subtracts the past that is supposed to be the unconscious ground of consciousness.

#### IV. "the tide of Time": Time and Eternity in *Milton*

The relationship described in Schelling's *Ages* between the No (aligned, in the terms of this chapter, with the eternal *beginning*) and the Yes as punctual, finite, unfolding events (analogous to the notion of *starting*), may be useful for rereading Blake's ostensibly predictive temporality, especially the relationship between the eternal and the temporal that forms in the moment of inspiration—the moment of prophetic self-annihilation—in *Milton*. Specifically, Schelling helps to illustrate how time's organizing function works, counterintuitively, to forestall apocalypse and to offer, in its place, a kind of mundane transcendence in the form of an open, unpredictable future: a future wherein whatever is posited in the future both has and does not have being, is both most actual and merely possible *at the same time*. In Blake, as in Schelling, the infinite and the eternal seem to be not outside of but rather within the finite and temporal world. Blake suggests as much in the opening line of *Auguries of Innocence*:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour. (1-4)

This vision seems to counterpoint the more depressing movement in *Jerusalem* where Los, “Fearing that Albion should turn his back against the Divine Vision” (45.3), witnesses the imagination’s slow destruction by tyrannical negations: “Every Universal Form. was become barren mountains of Moral/ Virtue: and every Minute Particular hardend into grains of sand” (45.20-21). Echoing his assertion that “every thing that lives is holy” (*America* 8.13), later in *Jerusalem* Blake notes that “every Minute Particular is Holy” (69.43) and that imaginative (re)vision—a form of reflexive seeing wherein “the eye altering alters all” (*E* 476)—attempts to reveal the world that is within the grain of sand rather than reducing the world to dirt’s blunt materialism. In other words, Blake turns the reduction of transcendence to the mundane into a resource such that the transcendent, rather, infects the mundane—redeeming, as it were, the commonplace rather than negating redemption. Indeed, as discussed below in more detail, this is one step toward Blake’s phenomenological reconceptualization of notions like transendence and metaphysics.

For instance, toward the end of *Jerusalem*, Los offers his most extended description of how “General Forms” or the “perfect Whole” of divine vision is immanent to the particular:

he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole  
 Must see it in its Minute Particulars; Organized & not as thou  
 O Fiend of Righteousness pretendest; thine is a Disorganized  
 And snowy cloud; brooder of tempests & destructive War  
 You smile with pomp & rigor: you talk of benevolence & virtue!  
 I act with benevolence & virtue & get murderd time after time:  
 You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you  
 May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law:  
 And you call that Swelld & bloated Form; a Minute Particular,  
 But General Forms have their vitality in Particulars: & every  
 Particular is a Man; a Divine Member of the Divine Jesus. (91.21-31)

As Blake says in his annotations to Reynolds, “Distinct General Form Cannot Exist” (*E* 638). Rather, the “Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of Ideas” and the “Singular & Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime” (*E* 636, 637). The very concept of wholeness is here reformulated.<sup>139</sup> Rather than a totalization achieved through aggregation, wholeness means a mobile process or exigency—a force rather than a thing—glimpsed through time’s relentless negativity. For, if Los is “murderd time after time” and forced, therefore, to re-create himself time after time, artistic wholeness seems to include and even rely on the “time after time,” or the intervals of finitude. If, for Blake, “only when vision is determinate, minute, and particular does it conduct to or contain infinity” (Weiskel 67), this is because the very concept of the infinite does not signify a state of changelessness, is not a heaven of utter boredom. Rather, Blake’s sense of “the perfect Whole” shares an uncanny relationship to negation that is essential to the maintenance of a notion of wholeness that is not reduced to Urizenic books of brass but rather invites the indeterminate as an opportunity for re-determination, re-vision, or—as noted in the context of *Milton*—poetic re-stating. In short, this is a wholeness that includes and celebrates the imagination as an active force. Just as the individual is nothing other than the eternal vitality of the imagination that makes different states possible and moves between them without being reducible to any one permanently<sup>140</sup>—states like selfhood, or Satan, that tend to impose a single vision of the universe—so the notion of wholeness here does not mean stasis but rather an activity, drive, or perhaps desire that will always seek to displace “negations” (hierarchical relationships in oppositions that remain static through time) with the more creative, supple relation of “contraries.”<sup>141</sup> 142

<sup>139</sup> Allan Vardy makes a similar point, though he emphasizes Blake’s distinction between negations and contraries in order to illustrate how the goal of rational totalization seems to replace productive contrariety with stultifying negations:

Totalization may be internally valid in a rationalist model of knowledge, but it becomes a fallen activity when it attempts to extend its authority into all other domains—when it takes itself as the sole structure of knowledge and thus confuses knowledge and method. In other words, Blake’s poetics erode the power of recuperation by exposing it as the product of a negating fiction. The Blakean sublime must be a contrary formulation. The pathos of loss and/or terror, rather than a condition to be superseded (the negative stage) must, instead, serve as the necessary sympathetic gesture in constituting the sublime—its contrary. Sublime aesthetics are thus always constituted by a contrary of pathos and sublimity. (6)

<sup>140</sup> “The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself” (*Milton* 32.32).

<sup>141</sup> There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary

Beyond the “time after time” rhythm of Los’ Miltonic self-annihilation, this concept of an immanent vision of wholeness is clearly modulated by temporality, as the pun on “minute” suggests: within the closely determined (minute) particular, is a unit of time (a minute). The minute as a temporal unit cannot be disjoined from the minute as the particular physiological or anthropomorphic embodiment of the absolute, eternal, and divine vision. At every minute—finite, particular, fleeting—there is the possibility of an eternal vision, such that one might say of the minute what Blake says of the Moment in *Milton*:

For in this Period the Poet’s Work is Done: and all the Great  
Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period  
Within a Moment[.] (29.1-3)

The central action of inspiration and self-annihilation in *Milton* takes place in this Moment, a formulation both minutely determined and measured by the temporal minute. That is, time’s redemption in *Milton* means overcoming the empty infinity (akin to the process of mere aggregation identified and criticized in *Jerusalem*) promulgated by the Elect and affirming the finite infinity of the imagination: the “minute particular” as the essence of imaginative vision in its complex temporality and embodied form. For if this is an absolute vision it is also only temporary, available for just a minute. More specifically, the Moment is to the minute what the individual is to a state. The individual is eternal. This does not mean that it is a self-contained substance but rather that it is the subjective desire that spurs the process of re-vision and subjective re-creation. Likewise, the Moment names the ecstatic potentiality planted within each minute not as a secret presence so much as a renovating caesura or void that particularizes the particular minute by de-totalizing time. In *Milton*, the focus is on finding the moment—or formulating such a moment—that “renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed” (35.45). This is a

---

The Negation must be destroyed to redeem the Contraries  
The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning power in Man  
This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Imortal  
Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated always (*Milton* 40.32-36)

<sup>142</sup> As Hazard Adams comments, *Milton*’s distinction between negations and contraries “is somewhat cryptic, but there is help elsewhere in Blake, where we learn that the negations Blake particularly dislikes and believes to be responsible for much modern error are good/evil, soul/body, and object/subject, all in his view being the production of reason” (433). Negations are narrow, one-sided binaries that are, in effect, structurally hypocritical given that the privileged term in each case denies its dependence on the subordinate term.

dimension of time that will not allow time to be absorbed into the apocalyptic calendar of the Elect and that will not be codified by Satan's "Watch Fiends" (35.43) (clock fiends) who divide life into oppressive watches or narrow perspectives.

It should be clear by this point that the renovating moment is not based on memorialization, as it is in Wordsworth's spots of time. Rather, Blake's renovating moment is more reflexive and represents a concept of self-transcendence coeval with the imagination as a self-transcending faculty—a faculty of finite infinitude. Put in terms of the larger concerns in *Milton*, the moment of inspiration, which is also the moment of self-annihilation, demands a temporality that allows for a vision of the eternal, although not an eternal vision: in contrast to the sequential and aggregative temporality that is complicit with self-aggrandizement, subjective mastery, and universal, rational determination, the moment of inspiration is both minutely particular—it happens at a particular time and place: to Blake in Lambeth Vale, at his cottage—and yet also *re-organizes time itself* as a scheme of self-understanding. The renovating moment affects not only other moments but, first and foremost, begins with *self*-renovation. This suspends both the restriction of the individual to the here and now and the sublime projection of the self into eternity. The Moment, like Schelling's construction of time in *Ages*, enables the Yes and the No—invention and reinvention—to have being in Blake in a gesture that fundamentally displaces traditional metaphysics. It is not so much a matter of interrupting time in order to liberate the subject from temporal, historical determination, as it is of *re-determining those determinations*, and of holding open, through the moment in each day, the possibility always of reformulating prevailing systems—which is rather different from rejecting all determination or systemetization as such. For, when Blake famously declares in *Jerusalem*, "I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans" (10.21), he suggests that systemetization is inevitable and necessary but can be related to as a task more or less affirmatively. Hence, Blake's time is "free" in a sense very close to Schelling's concept of freedom: for Schelling, freedom means neither an escape from determination nor the ability to make a simple choice between inessential options; rather, freedom is the power to take up the necessity of determination, to create a system, or to choose one's necessary self rather than receive it passively from external authorities.

This possibility of radical re-determination or freedom applies, as suggested, to time itself. In fact, time—ironic negativity—is nothing other than this power of immanent redetermination. This is precisely how the eternal (moment) resides ‘within,’ and yet remains irreducible to, a time or a particular unit (minute) of time. Rather than the eternal being outside of and at some kind of distance from temporality, the eternal for Blake is the ability, ‘within’ time, always to be renovated or restructured: for time is neither reduced to its objective expression in a clock or calendar nor, at the opposing pole, reduced to pure contingency. To anticipate Ernst Bloch’s terms addressed in more detail in chapter five, time for Blake emerges as a transcendence without transcendence—a relation of contraries, the moment and the minute—and therefore has immediate consequences for the treatment of subjectivity. If, for Wordsworth, the spots of time are supposed to quilt subjectivity together through negation and determination, by contrast,

Blake’s contraries resist the self-aggrandizement of sublime recuperation by refusing to supersede one of the terms in the contrary opposition. The poet experiences “the grandeur of inspiration” (*Milton*, 43, 2), but does not do so by superseding the fallen condition of his basic humanity. No effort is made to overcome this unstable flux, and in fact the inspired state cannot be achieved without its contrary, the fallen state; inspiration works through its contrary relation to error, and error inevitably occurs as the result of any effort to stabilize inspiration into dogma. This contrary engagement creates the productive “energy” of Blake’s poetics. Any effort to stabilize a perception of the sublime by superseding the fallen condition from which it sprang is a negation, and precipitates a more terrible fall into utter blindness to the very possibility of vision. (Vardy 5)

Blake’s sublime—and the subject who is ostensibly galvanized in this aesthetics—is more deconstructive, dispersed. Blakean transcendence involves a momentary glimpse of radical imagination—“the Human Form, Divine” (*Jerusalem* 27.58)—but does not necessarily economize this as a subjective power or as something the self dominates via Reason’s (in Blake’s terms, the Spectre’s) totalizations. This pointedly contrasts the self-aggrandizement of the Wordsworthian sublime. Indeed, by identifying self-annihilation with inspiration, Blake illustrates, through this starkly contrasting idiom, how

Wordsworth can maintain a certain sense of the self only by withdrawing from the general economy prophecy exposes—as if Wordsworth did not choose a good profession if a stable subjectivity is what he wanted. That is, Wordsworth, as presented earlier, is akin to Blake's image of the fallen John Milton on his couch in eternity. For Wordsworth seems to prefer the unannihilated self and desires to achieve the status of the Elect. As one who is anxious to be among the Elect, then, Wordsworth falls into that class Blake, as discussed above, names the "Redeemed," those "Who live in doubts & fears perpetually tormented by the Elect" (*Milton* 25.36).

*Milton's* ostensibly predictive itinerary, one that especially in the final plates appears to look forward to an imminent apocalypse, is suspended by its mournful relationship to the Lambeth books. As discussed above, the renovating moment's action of self-annihilation—applying this action not just to the selfhood but to any dogmatic concept of narrative history, any ossified state, allowing the imagination, as the repetition of *Urizen* in *Milton* suggests, to re-state creation—seems to import rather than cancel the radically provisional or workless nature of the Lambeth period. As in Schelling's prophetic narrative scheme, on one hand the eternal is understood as within rather than outside time and that, as a result, time can ameliorate the otherwise painful contradictions of eternity through its division of God into simultaneous but distinct temporal states. Yet, on the other hand, this same reformulation of time and eternity introduces into God a radical negativity that seems to undermine the confidence of the original prediction of God's eventual revelation in history. For, the past and the future into which God's psychotic unconscious and potential-for-being, respectively, are projected are themselves dimensions without being. Hence, one way to talk about time's role in the system is as the power for immanent re-determination, a kind of prophetic negativity that emphasizes how the pro-visional (in the sense of coming before and anticipating the future) is always provisional (or subject to a reformulation of its own logic). Or, again, it means that the work of mourning the illuminated text is supposed to perform never quite manages to overcome trauma, such that, as in Schelling, God remains in a state of dismal woe: "we will not shun presenting even that primordial being (the first possibility of God externally manifesting) in the state of suffering that comes from growth" (101).



Just as Blake's 'systematic' "counterpractice [...] finds expression in a writerly use of form that is phenomenological rather than postmodern and that therefore generates a perspectivism that is not relativism" (Rajan *Supplement* 199), so his treatment of time does not equal indifference to narrative coherence so much as open the possibility of the perpetual refiguration of causal and temporal relationships.<sup>143</sup> For, as Mark Bracher usefully notes, in the context of Blake's *Milton* and in language that complements Vardy's discussion of how Blake's treatment of subject formation eludes a Wordsworthian and Urizenic agglomeration,

the way in which time makes whole [...] is not through uninterrupted aggrandizement or positivity. Rather, it moves toward fulfillment by a continual negation of immediate, present actuality. We normally see time in terms of duration or endurance, and thus we depict it as "baled & aged." But in truth time is entelechy—continuous change and transformation and eternal renewal; it is a continuous morning (and mourning) or new beginning, that creative power through which novelty enters the world. As such it is mediation between the actual and the non-actual, the "Spirit of Prophecy," which grasps the possibility at the heart of actuality and realizes that possibility. Because of the constant transformation which it produces, "time is the mercy of Eternity; without Times swiftness/ Which is the swiftness of all things: all were eternal torment" ([*Milton*] 24:72-3). Since the very nature of existence is based upon finitude and incompleteness, which manifest themselves as torment, without time—i.e., change—these torments would never be mitigated in any respect. (142)

Blake's time, in other words, neither merely aggregates nor does it form, as Plato quipped, the image of eternity, as its ostensible duration is an a-temporal concoction. "The effect" of such a concept of time, as Leonard Deen suggests, "is not only to put off the vision of apocalypse but to redeem time, to show eternity *in* time by showing us that 'Eternity is in love with the productions of time,' as Blake puts it in the 'Proverbs of Hell'" (185). Hence, time's eternal beginning is immanent to time just as Blake's God is

---

<sup>143</sup> Or as Rajan says later on, "although it is true that an open form unbinds us from the mimetic claims of chronology and allows for visionary rearrangements that defy historical limits, mobile forms open windows into eternity only as part of a perspectivism that reinscribes vision in a field of relations" (*Supplement* 203).

not objectively in the world but within the same imagination that invents Him: "All deities reside in the human breast" (*Marriage* 11).

Blake offers a minute particular of this detotalizing temporality with the image of a solid crystal whence two streams spring:

In this Moment Ololon descended to Los & Enitharmon  
Unseen beyond the Mundane Shell Southward in Miltons track

Just in this Moment when the morning odours rise abroad  
And first from the Wild Thyme, stands a Fountain in a rock  
Of crystal flowing into two Streams, one flows thro Golgonooza  
And thro Beulah to Eden beneath Los's western Wall  
The other flows thro the Aerial Void & all the Churches

Meeting again in Golgonooza beyond Satans Seat. (*Milton* 35.46-53)

Ololon's descent parallels Milton's and seems to gather together the text's action in a vast simultaneity. Indeed, in Susan Fox's reading, "all the perspectives of the poem [i.e., *Milton*] are focused on a single event [and] that event takes place in a single instant which takes Blake fifty pages to describe but has no measurable duration" (xii). For Fox, "the principle of simultaneity" and "the principle of multiple perspectives" (6) are reflected in this image of temporal suspension where the rivers marry through transparency their urgent motion with the firm, perpetual stasis of the crystal. However, the text counters time's reduction to a static dualism or negation.<sup>144</sup> That is, the "Wild Thyme" shifts perspective on time again, not only through its punning language but also the synesthesia wherein time's expression shifts from the visual to the olfactory. As Vardy notes, "by creating the contrary, temporal and eternal, the poet subverts the ideological attempts to secure the eternal (through dogma) and makes possible the eternal moment immanently held in each moment of the temporal flux" (9). Put differently, if the Moment in *Milton* tends toward a simultaneity that appears similar to a conventional understanding of the eternal as an apocalyptic revelation that is atemporal, it is important that we remain sensitive to Blake's almost Schellingian sense of eternity's temporality. Hence, one must

---

<sup>144</sup> "Negations are not Contraries: Contraries mutually Exist:/ But Negations Exist Not" (*Jerusalem* 17.33-34).

remain somewhat skeptical of Fox's tendency to reintegrate—in Blake's terms, to negate—the diverse perspectives she rightly observes. For as Rajan notes,

[p]erspective, according to [Fox], is an angle of deviation, to be measured in relation to “the comprehensive criterion of eternity.” But in the early texts perspectives are juxtaposed rather than cinematically superimposed, the bard's song being counterpointed against Earth's answer and not hegemonically placed above it. The fact that we pass through various perspectives serially, and that we cannot occupy them at the same time, suggests that we need a new perceptual vocabulary to describe the perspectivism of the early Blake. (*Supplement* 210)

Such perspectivism seems necessary not only for the early and middle Blake but also for *Milton*. It is, after all, eternity that Milton has to *leave* in order to redeem himself through self-annihilation, suggesting that the text undertakes a very deliberate detotalization of vision, that it seeks to dissolve selfhood in “the tide of Time” (*Milton* 22.25). In fact, it remains unclear if the various divisions of Milton necessarily coalesce around the proper name. On one hand, the language of “folding”<sup>145</sup> suggests not merely multiplication but also closing or compacting: a way of generating multiples through division but without complete separation. On the other hand, however, the nature of inspiration, addressed below in more detail, seems to involve a kind of subjective exposure and displacement that does not return to any kind of contained self. In fact, readers of *Milton* gesture

---

<sup>145</sup> Blake uses the image of folding almost obsessively in *Milton*. For instance, Man is “Four-fold” (20.17) while the Polypus is “A self-devouring monstrous Human Death Twenty-seven fold” (34.26). Moreover, “Moral Virtue” is described as a “cruel two-fold Monster” (40.22). In fact, the central action of redemption involves reconsidering the “Six-fold Miltonic Female” (41.31)—an allusion to Milton's three wives and three daughters without whom *Paradise Lost* could not have been written. In her discussion of Schelling's 1815 *Ages*, Rajan describes the relationship between negative and positive forces in terms of folding—though understood in a more Deleuzian way—as well:

But unlike the 1813 version, which schematizes the two forces in a dialectic of distinct wills, or in contrast to the 1811 version, which sees the negating force as a usurper (*W1* 23), in 1815 the two wills constitute an “annular drive . . . in which there is no differentiation”: neither “a veritable higher nor a veritable lower” (*W3* 20), as the two exchange places, each becoming the outside or inside of the other, in a relation of folding rather than of contraries leading to progression.

While there is too little time and space here to go into much detail, folding offers a model for conceptualizing difference and identity in a way that might be closer to what Blake describes as a contrary as opposed to a negation. Schelling's rather uncanny concept of dialectic, likewise, benefits from comparison to the figure of folding as a way of understanding how terms in ostensible opposition can also form, in his special sense, an “identity” (8).

toward—even as they retreat from—this destabilizing effect in their discussions of the Moment’s proximity to experiences like ecstasy and epiphany.

In “Providence and the Moment in Blake’s *Milton*,” for instance, Peter Alan Taylor argues that “in Blake’s *Milton* a similar conception of providence [to that described in *Paradise Lost*] emerges, a providence which operates in two ways: through history in the form of the ‘Seven Angels of the Presence’ and in the timeless moment of inspiration where it is embodied in the figure of Ololon. These two aspects of providence are brought together in Book the Second of Blake’s poem in the symbols of the Lark and the Wild Thyme” (44). This synthesis “in the moment of grace” or “the moment of creative inspiration” (Taylor 52) is, however, darkened by the hint of sacrifice that attends the Wild Thyme passage: “etymologically, the word *thyme* is derived from a Greek verb meaning ‘to offer a sacrifice’ and Luvah is the form of Jesus seen as a sacrificial victim. Within this context, the purple flowers of the Wild Thyme become only the burial garments left at the tomb, its odour representing the spices used to preserve the dead, and Ololon becomes the woman weeping at the empty tomb” (Taylor 56). This observation would seem, then, to complicate Taylor’s larger argument that some kind of “providential circuit is completed” (58) when the Wild Thyme and the Lark merge and diverge in the same instant:

The Lark and the Wild Thyme emerge from the same point as the fountain [of crystal] with its two streams. The Lark spirals up through the conical twenty-seven heavens of historical time, and the Wild Thyme, the pun emphasizing it as a symbol of unregulated time, opens within to Eternity, expanding conically within its open centre. These two cones converge in the moment of inspiration in the form of a double spiral emanating in opposite directions from the same point, a figure which Blake calls a “vortex.” The vortex unites the eye of the poet with object perceived; it is therefore essential that the character Blake witness these events, for it is actually in the mind of the poet that the providential circuit is completed. These events occur in the moment that transcends time, the moment Blake describes near the end of the vision of Golgonooza that ends Book the First of *Milton*. (Taylor 57-58)

While the moment might well be described in terms of one vortex intersecting another and opening a kind of infinity within the finite, Taylor's reading seems to overlook the disintegrative and radically pro-visional aspect of this phenomenon, mistakenly suggesting that history is completed here in a single vision.

That is, Blake's moment does *not* transcend, in the sense of "escape from," time. Time in fact is nothing but local or minute self-transcendence. Rather, the moment seems to mark a point of radical transition that disorients as much as it orients the subject, for it can have the effect of displacing the very coherence of subjectivity. For instance, on one hand, when one—inspired—passes through a vortex, he gains perspective on the plane of existence he has just emerged from:

when once a traveller thro' Eternity  
Has passd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind  
His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun:  
Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty,  
While he [i.e., the traveller] keeps onward in his wondrous journey on the  
earth.

(*Milton* 15.22-26)

On the other hand, as Milton falls from eternity through the vortex and into "the Sea of Time & Space" (15.46), the points of orientation described earlier, where "the eye of man views both the east & west encompassing/ Its vortex; and the north & south, with all their starry host" (15.28-29), become patently unreliable:

in its vortex Milton bent down  
To the bosom of death, what was underneath soon seemed above.  
A cloudy heaven mingled with stormy seas in loudest ruin. (15.41-43)

As in Dante's *Inferno*, reorientation can be disorienting. Dante and Virgil climb up (or is it down?) Satan, frozen at the centre of the earth, pass through the centre of gravity, and—in a moral as well as cosmic sense—radically re-orient the trajectory of the *Comedia*. In a temporal as opposed to spatial register, Milton's decision to "go to Eternal Death" (*Milton* 14.14) suggests that chronology—a mode of organization one might gain perspective on once passing through its vortex—becomes confusing, as the deadly pun on Wild Thyme implies. Or, like Kierkegaard's moment discussed in chapter one, Blake's

moment paradoxically unifies and divides: if Kierkegaard's moment 'works' by displacing the very understanding that would claim comprehension, so does Blake's moment function both as a determinate, local, and embodied temporality as well as a kind of eternity insofar as that determination can be reformulated "time after time."

That is, rather than completing a "providential circuit," which implies an univocal vision of what exists, in a metaphysical scheme—that is, precisely the kind of vision that would become the dogmatic basis an Urizenic law applied without distinction to both lion and ox—the moment's ecstatic or wild energy necessarily deconstructs coherent vision because it suspends the subject in a texture of perspectives that are *not* merely the privations of a superior, transcendent authority. As Bracher argues,

[t]he rock of crystal portrays the definite and determinate actuality of the moment, while the fountain embodies the moment's ecstatic aspect. The fact that the ecstatic [aspect] arises out of the self-enclosed, impervious aspect indicates that integrity and invulnerability, on the one hand, and ecstasis, on the other, are not mutually exclusive, but rather are, in fact, mutually implicit. For ecstasis presupposes a definite, determinate actuality which is to be surpassed, and definite actuality occurs, as we have seen, only by virtue of *activity*, which is in its very nature an ecstatic or self-differing movement beyond the status quo. (220-221, Bracher's emphasis)

Indeed, this sense of ambivalence—where the poet has one foot in time and the other in eternity, as it were—might be better described in terms of epiphany, a suggestion that again invites contrast with Wordsworth's renovating moment. For as C.C. Barfoot notes in "Milton Silent Came Down my Path': The Epiphany of Blake's Left Foot," "it is with Wordsworth that taxonomists of the literary epiphany have usually begun" (61), thinking of his spots of time in particular. For Barfoot, epiphany is not merely a sudden insight but "the disclosure of the sacred in the mundane" (61) or the profound in the apparently superficial. *Milton* is, in particular, open to this reading given the famous image on Plate 15:

Then I saw him [i.e., Milton] in the Zenith as a falling star,  
Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;

And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there. (47-49)

Blake's left foot is, after all, a literally *pedestrian* site for inspiration, making the instance stranger by its contrast to the gravitas of the event—something anticipated in the text by Los's strange form of mourning upon discovering the damage done by both Satan and Palamabron:

Then Los took off his left sandal placing it on his head,

Signal of solemn mourning: when the servants of the Mills

Beheld the signal they in silence stood, tho' drunk with wine. (8.11-13)

In a gesture of reversal recalling not only the vortex but also the crucifixion of St. Peter, who according to tradition is crucified upside down, Los atones for Satan and Palamabron's mutual betrayals through a 'pedestrian' image.

As Barfoot argues, it is between the minute Milton's star enters Blake's left foot and the minute wherein Los "stoop'd down/ And bound [Blake's] sandals on in Udan-Adan" such that Blake might "walk forward thro' Eternity" (*Milton* 22.8-9, 5), that the "redemptive journey takes place" (Barfoot 69). For Barfoot, however, these minute particulars or particular minutes of (pedestrian) inspiration do not constitute the essence of epiphany. Rather, they are merely gestures that hint at the proper epiphany, which Barfoot takes as the revelation of the renovating Moment that Satan cannot find, discussed above in terms of time's immanent ecstasy or the power in each minute that is not reducible to the minute:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find

Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find

This Moment & it multiply. & when it once is found

It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed[.] (35.42-45)

At this point, however, Barfoot makes a somewhat overhasty equation between Blake and Wordsworth, arguing that "these lines in which Blake describes a moment out of time, inaccessible to the pressures of material existence, are clearly equivalent to Wordsworth's famous 'spots of time' passage in the *Prelude* (XII, ll. 208ff.)" (74). While the verbal and superficial similarities are indeed enticing—especially if one recalls that Wordsworth's spots claim, after several revisions, to have a "*renovating* virtue" (11.259, my emphasis)—the simple equation overlooks Blake's hostility to memory, a hostility tied to

his reformulation of metaphysics and inextricable even from his ethics. For Blake will oppose imaginative or creative vision to memory formalized in the work of allegory. In *Milton*, for instance, in the same instant as Milton recognizes that his unannihilated selfhood is Satanic, he details his various errors, asking rhetorically, “What do I do here before the Judgement? without my Emanation?/ With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration[?]” (14.28-29). In “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” Blake will be even clearer about this opposition, where the daughters of memory represent a closed economy of correspondence that, for Blake, is a weak form of creation—if it deserves that appellation at all: “The Last Judgement is not Fable or Allegory but Vision Fable or Allegory are totally distinct & inferior kinds of Poetry. Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is Formed by the Daughters of Memory. Imagination is Surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration who in the aggregate are called Jerusalem” (*E* 544). Ultimately, then, Milton’s redemption requires that he “cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration” (*Milton* 41.4), that he welcome rather than resist the Shelleyan “dis-memberment” of inspiration in a manner that Wordsworth, as argued in chapter two, was unable or unwilling to do.<sup>146</sup>

If Wordsworth’s ego reads inner experience as trauma, Blake’s valorization of productive vision means displacing the restricted economy of memory that aims to totalize the self through (auto)biography such that prophecy’s discontinuity need not be reduced either to purely damaging or religiously ecstatic extremes. That is, Blake’s perspectivism suggests a phenomenological as opposed to a traditionally metaphysical sensibility. Hegel’s phenomenological response to Kantian metaphysics meant fundamentally re-conceptualizing Kant’s dualism and the nature of the thing-in-itself. While for Kant, phenomenal appearances remained merely allegorical, as it were,

---

<sup>146</sup> Harold Bloom, in his notes to Erdman’s edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, makes a similar claim to Barfoot’s, arguing that “the whole of this sequence” played out around the moment that Satan cannot find on plates 35-36 “finds a clear parallel in Wordsworth’s account of ‘spots of time’ in *The Prelude*, for like Wordsworth Blake is concerned with renovation, and a renovation initially dependent upon mundane experience” (840). However, given the complex nature of Blakean renovation as a form of self-annihilation, it seems, again, dubious to suggest that Wordsworth and Blake are performing basically analogous acts simply on the basis of a common term. Indeed, in his annotations to Wordsworth’s 1815 *Poems*, Blake is clear that Wordsworth’s understanding of the imagination pits “the Natural Man [...] against the Spiritual Man Continually” (654) since Wordsworth cannot see what is for Blake a fundamental truth: namely, that “Imagination has nothing to do with Memory” (655).



Hegel—in Slavoj Žižek’s compelling reading—argued that the ‘thing’ is really the *force* of negation: it is not just that there is no thing-in-itself for Hegel, but that the thing-in-itself *is* negation, thus opening the possibility of a more dynamic, dialectical method that would see Spirit unfolding through time as various shapes of consciousness, free from the illusory supervision of the Kantian Thing.<sup>147</sup> Hegel’s response to Kant might find a parallel in Blake’s response to what he would term Science and Philosophy. As Donald Ault argues, describing a position that might broadly be called metaphysical,

“Newtonian narrative” presupposes that behind the text lies a single unified field (*ur*-narrative, privileged originating event, state of consciousness, and so on) whose essential features do not irreconcilably and incommensurably conflict with one another but can (in theory at least) be fully captured through systematic analytic explanation. In such a view, discrepancies between textual details merely reflect errors of perception or memory in characters or in the narrator. [...] [However,] Blake’s whole enterprise constitutes the irreducible presence of multiple interfering and incommensurable structures that operate 1) to rule out a pre-existent underlying world which surface events (i.e., those narrated by the linear text) partially rearrange and partially distort, and 2) to generate a narrative field in which the past is not finished and closed but incomplete and open—alterable and revisable.

That is, instead of a prefabricated underlying single world or *ur*-narrative [...] that supports the details of the surface narrative [...], Blake substitutes a transformational process at the service of (and brought into existence by) the temporally unfolding surface narrative itself. (3-4)

In other words, Blake’s dissatisfaction with allegory and the memorial form of poetic production so central to Wordsworth seems to stem from the former’s re-vision of the metaphysics wherein an obscure substantiality holds human experience and understanding in Urizenic thrall. As Rajan argues, Blake’s response is to forward an

---

<sup>147</sup> For Hegel, the “Thing is itself nothing but a lack, an empty place; [...] beyond the phenomenal appearance there is only a certain negative self-relationship because of which the positively given phenomenal world is perceived as ‘mere appearance’—in other words that ‘the supersensible is therefore appearance *qua* appearance’” (Žižek *Sublime* 193).

almost cubist philosophy, something Ault describes as a “transformational narrative ontology” (5). The phenomenology of surfaces in Blake displaces metaphysical readings, displaces the assumption of a fundamental presence and reality outside of human consciousness and experience that philosophy can approach only asymptotically—that is, melancholically—reducing all thought to some kind of distortedness. Hence, a more enabling perspective would consider Blake’s “use of surface” as “phenomenological, in that reality is not denied but does not exist as a transcendental signified” (Rajan *Supplement* 211).

Time in *Milton* is indeed structured and particular, something made clear in both the architectural specificity of the “wondrous buildings” (28.45) constructed by Los’s Sons corresponding to different units of time and the organic temporality that seems to envelop those works: “A Moment equals a pulsation of the artery” (28.47). But if times are structured, these are not particularly stable buildings; like all the comforts of Beulah—and time regulated as narrative or predictive prophecy can be considered one such comfort—there is something deceptive or misleading about this construction. For unlike Wordsworth’s moment that predicates its renovating virtue on recollection and the promise of recovery and retroactive totalization, Blake’s moment renovates time itself. In terms of the discussion of Blake and Kierkegaard’s prefaces above, this means that even in *Milton* the poet’s work is not *done* in the sense of “finished” but rather that work, as labour, is perpetually performed in and through a temporality that is itself subject to reformulation. The poet’s work is only ever “done” in the sense of “actively performed,” the term, in Blake’s usage, performing a kind of semantic self-annihilation by eliminating its own sense of limitation. Put differently, narrative and history are myths, although this is not to say that they are not real or that they have no truth. Rather, if history is neither absolutely true nor a picture of reality as such (this kind of mimesis has been displaced by phenomenology), it is still, like all myth, a construction necessary for life: while contingent, such myth is far from arbitrary. Blake takes myth seriously. Myth is not so much a distortion of the truth as a provisional formulation of a reality that can *only ever be formed provisionally*, because there is no transcendental signified to submit appearances to as some kind of ultimate tribunal. The provisional, here, again becomes

pro-visional. This is a kind of prophecy that does not or cannot claim metaphysical truth since there is no transcendental presence to appeal to or to compare with.

Pro-vision, rather, is a form of seeing that successfully distinguishes “States from Individuals in those States,” since “States Change: but Individual Identities never change nor cease” (*Milton* 32.22, 23). That is, the states humans necessarily exist within are, nevertheless, subject in some measure to human will, re-determination, or reinvention: that is, they are subject to the power of the Imagination, which is itself not “not a State” but rather, as noted earlier, “the Human Existence itself” (*Milton* 32.30-32) and eternal in its detotalizing temporality. Temporal particularity is necessary and describes the shape of human life and yet ought not to be severed from its contrary, the renovating moment or the infinite power to annihilate a particular version of temporality and to retemporalize experience. Because all states are deeply provisional, there is a sense in which any particular vision might ultimately be aborted. If, in other words, a state is something created like a work, the provisional nature of *these states or works* suggests that they are akin to prefaces: starts that do not necessarily escape from the beginning, from the negative dialectic of the work of the absence of (the) work, from the unexampled moment of inspiration. So, if it would be mistaken to reduce time to timelessness or a concept of eternity as exterior to time—to confuse Blakean prophecy with apocalyptic, totalized, tyrannical vision—it would be just as mistaken to consider oneself the passive victim of a concept of history that would brook no human intervention or re-determination. Hence, if Fox argues that “all the actions of [*Milton*] occur in the last measurable segment of the moment, the last fragment of time itself, the instant before apocalypse puts an end to time” (18), such a dire vision is owing to her metaphysics. For that fragment itself fragments; the renovating moment of Blakean prophecy redeems time not by returning it to an illusory Eden of plenitude but by revealing time itself as a state about to be created and re-created—like Milton himself.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“The dark destiny that involves us”: Caroline Lamb, Mary Shelley,  
and the Supplement of Prophecy

*Creatio est exodus, non est restitutio in integrum*

—Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*

### I. Prophetic Rebellion as Counterhistory

The ambivalence between prophecy’s vatic fullness and ironic emptiness is, in the case of the poetry discussed in the preceding chapters, expressed at the level of self-displacing tropes, figures, images, and rhetoric. Indeed, Coleridge’s apt description of poetry as “an interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose” (206) suggests how Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake generated their particularly compact networks of affects and effects. The shapes of consciousness that emerged in the preceding, poetic works gained depth and richness in part from poetry’s hermeneutic extravagance, occasioned by the poets’ mingling of clear goals with more accidental experiments: because verse relishes its complexity, any aspect of form or content can echo, counterpoint, intensify, or undermine any other aspect in ways that are impossible ever completely to stabilize. Poetry retains a persistent recalcitrance or inassimilable strangeness that renders any particular reading fundamentally provisional, thus inviting perpetual rereading. Prose, in contrast, tends to operate according to a comparatively dilatory economy. Hence, if the paradoxes of prophetic consciousness tended in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake to find expression in or as minute particulars, these same kinds of paradoxes find expression in the prose of Caroline Lamb and Mary Shelley both through a series of micro-events that can be gathered across the texts’ surfaces and also through the extended representation of prophetic characters. The novels discussed below trade some of poetry’s contingency and evocative thrust for a more deliberate and controlled delineation of content. That is, ideas, like characters and plots, unfold serially, developing and organizing themselves more patiently over a longer course of articulations. In other words, these novels—given their comparatively expansive or roving forms of expression—seem, at least superficially, to parallel

Enlightenment history's form of discourse. For prose stresses the effects of the intervals *between* pregnant, formative moments of intense consciousness just as Enlightenment history attends to and collects the minutiae surrounding signal events.

That is, prose, typically, dwells on the spaces between Wordsworth's spots of time, as if to shape its world through a calmer, inductive accretion of detail rather than bold strokes of sudden deduction akin to supernatural inspiration. Hence, prose is just as complex as poetry, though its complexity functions differently and demands a different approach from the reader. For instance, given the elongated nature of prosaic expression, it is particularly difficult consistently to orient and frame one's reading for the work's full duration—a work that, especially in Lamb's *Glenarvon* and other Gothic texts, revels in digression. That is, where Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake's densely constellated poetry demand interpretive *analysis* in order to parse overdetermined instances, Lamb and Mary Shelley's prose requires a stronger hermeneutic *synthesis*. Hence, in the latter case, it is particularly important to approach texts with a theory—a way of seeing—lest meanings disperse into empty underdetermination: that is, lest reading fail to condense its idea and turn, therefore, into Borges' map of the world—a map that is 'perfect' only because it covers every inch of the globe it is supposed to represent. In this chapter on female prophecy in Lamb's *Glenarvon* and Shelley's *Valperga* and *The Last Man*, Ernst Bloch's concept of atheism in the Bible affords such orientation by modeling the function of prophetic negativity in the context of prose and of history conceived as a form of prose.

This particular concept of prophecy, however, complicates the notion of hermeneutic synthesis and the comparison of these prose works to Enlightenment historiography. That is, as Bloch helps to illustrate, prophecy in Lamb and Shelley is less a discrete element or concept than a force. Indeed, reading prophecy here does not inductively produce an "idea" of prophecy but rather unleashes a mode of negativity that detotalizes the prose of the world in each novel. In fact, the force of prophecy in Bloch, Lamb, and Shelley reintroduces a kind of poetic density that will displace the comparatively neat boundaries within the fictions composed through prose's measured and methodical forms of delineation. Hence, the effect of prophecy on the novels discussed below goes far beyond its episodic thematization—though readings may indeed begin with or remain focused through discussions of prophetic figures and acts in each

work. Prophecy, that is, also becomes part of a larger performance of the text's self-displacement and re-determination that loosens its relationship to Enlightenment history's own deeply prosaic structure. That is, going beyond their status as narratives about prophecy, the *form* taken by Lamb and Shelley's texts gestures toward a concept of prophetic narrative.

\* \* \*

In his late and little-studied *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch forwards a concept of prophecy that redeploys for practical, revolutionary purposes the detotalizing thrust of the Romantic prophet.<sup>148</sup> That is, Bloch offers a way to think the political through prophetic negativity without necessarily instrumentalizing prophecy. In that will serve as a model for reading Lamb and Shelley's novels, Bloch's analysis casts the Bible as an insurrectionary manifesto, though one corrupted almost immediately by political and religious institutions that would diminish its subversive energy by transforming imminent social and political change into a doctrine of transcendence that easily justifies and therefore perpetuates worldly inequality and tyranny. Bloch's task is thus to recover the political radicalism of the Bible in an effort to affirm human agency and historical effectiveness, to wrest Christianity from what Blake, in the preceding chapter, described as the stagnant ideology of the Elect.<sup>149</sup> To this end, Bloch insists on a kind of local

---

<sup>148</sup> Late in the text, Bloch is explicit concerning how his notions of hope and utopia—key terms from his more well-known works—while concrete, are still resolutely negative insofar as they remain non-dogmatic and non-prescriptive, thus distancing him from Utopian Socialism and similar programs: "To speak unmythologically, the Negative is present at the heart of Process-as-such, motivating it as a process of healing salvation; for there would be no process at all if there were not something there that should not be there, something to serve as a constant threat. What would become of the militant dialectical primacy of the principle of hope if there was not a highly actual (though not as yet decisive) presence of Nothing (that is, of possible total defeat) to set it off as the *postulate* of All (that is, of possible total fulfillment)? [...]. [T]here is enormous Utopian potentiality in the world: potentiality for an Optimum educed from an undefeated Negative" (248).

<sup>149</sup> In fact, this is consistent with Žižek's concluding comments in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, where he sees the radical potential of Christianity as its own immanent sacrifice of the institution it has become. This gesture comes very close to Bloch's notion, discussed here in more detail, that the core or essence of Christianity is—somewhat "perversely," in Lacan's sense—a kind of atheism. Žižek writes:

At the very core of Christianity, there is another dimension. When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?": the hope that there is a father who has abandoned me. The "Holy Spirit" is the community deprived of its support in the big Other. The point of Christianity as a religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the

eschatology—essentially, the necessary finitude of beings and projects—that is corrosive to all trans-historical totalization, even and especially the total violence of apocalypse. Bloch’s prophecy is therefore resolutely negative or non-positing—his is not the utopian socialist’s programmatic Marxism. This negative utopia finds its most complete expression in a work like Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* where, as discussed below, history’s rational, dialectical progress is forced to encounter its own repudiated worklessness in the form of absolute biological violence—the kind of violence quarantined by Percy Shelley in the Wandering Jew but universalized by Mary Shelley’s plague. At the same time, Blochian prophecy is not in the least nihilistic.<sup>150</sup> Through his focus on revolutionary figures such as Moses, Job, and Jesus, Bloch seeks to recover the Bible as a utopian text, though in his specific sense of “utopia” as something concrete, this-worldly, and yet not available to *a priori* formulation. That is, for Bloch, a correct reading of the Bible—and for Lamb and Shelley, a corrected reading of institutionalized history—helps to illustrate the concrete possibilities that inhere in the actual and are, yet, unrealized or non-coincident with what is.

The nature of this latent possibility finds its most explicit formulation in Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* as the “not-yet-conscious,” a form of pre-consciousness that anticipates the intersection between ripening concrete, historical conditions and imagination’s inventions, thus opening the world to a novel form of consciousness itself, to a shape of thinking that could not previously be thought from within existing forms of thought. Like Lamb’s suspension of the Hegelian concept of expressive causation in history in *Glenarvon* or Shelley’s double negation of prophecy in *Valperga* and *The Last*

---

becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds. (171)

<sup>150</sup> Bloch will associate prophecy with this mundane eschatology—or popular revolution—and contrast it to the transcendence of apocalyptic destruction. In fact, he will read the former as the condition for the latter: “the prophets preceded the apocalyptic writers in every sense, not least in their Utopian temperament, so radically different from that of late Judaic Wisdom literature—a literature which people tried, so to speak, to hook on to the lightning in the Eschaton. Indeed without the conversion of heaven and earth which the prophets intended, the genre of apocalypse would be unthinkable. It would lack its specifically Hebrew element—Prometheus” (*Atheism* 105-106).

*Man*, Bloch considers how discourses change through a reflexive, self-critical relationship with the thought they make possible.<sup>151</sup> As Bloch writes,

[t]he Not-Yet-Conscious in man belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out, Manifested-Out in the world. Not-Yet-Conscious interacts and reciprocates with Not-Yet-Become, more specifically with what is approaching in history and in the world. And the examination of anticipatory consciousness must fundamentally serve to make comprehensible the actual reflections which now follow, in fact depictions of the wished-for, the anticipated better life, in psychological and material terms. From the anticipatory, therefore, knowledge is to be gained on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet. (*Hope* 1.13)

For Bloch, the Bible retains hints of precisely this kind of openness to novel shapes of consciousness. Those hints emerge in the various a-theisms of the text: that is, in moments that counteract the priestly notions of “re-ligion,” of “binding back” to some kind of origin or metaphysics that absorbs the future into a regressive itinerary (or restrictive economy) of either Platonic *anamnesis* or Judeo-Christian redemption. In contrast to these night-dreams of civilization that limit the world to a static being rather than entertaining substantial becoming, Bloch’s reading of the Bible aims to reveal that “there is always an exodus in the world, an exodus from the particular *status quo*. And there is always a hope, which is connected with rebellion—a hope founded in the concrete given possibilities for a new being. As a handhold in the future, a process which, though by no means achieved, is yet by no means in vain, thanks to the never-abating pregnancy of its solution, our solution” (*Atheism* 121-122).

The not-yet-conscious, the a-theism that allows consciousness and history to exit from the *status quo*, is not a positive content. Rather, in comparison to the *infinite* absolute negativity of irony, Bloch is interested in a kind of *finite* existential deficit that suspends any historical or epistemological apocalypse that would claim to totalize the world. Indeed, this renovating absence is situated not merely in but *as* the future of being,

---

<sup>151</sup> Discourse here is taken in the Foucaultian sense, as a condition of possible thought. This formulation clearly recalls Kant though, unlike Kant’s *Categories*, Discourses are historically and materially determined rather than transcendently deduced. For Foucault, thought’s conditions are not, in other words, derived only from thought itself but also from the particular world consciousness is necessarily embedded within, lending an historical, social, or political dimension to critical epistemology.



turning away from a Platonic “metaphysics [that] has become paralyzing, transfixing, indeed even underhanded in the way it has established its Behind, its Up-there, and become a ready-made handhold—in the way it has bolted a static door in the face of the real *Meta*, the Tomorrow within the Today” (*Atheism* 66). Rather than detecting “‘true being’ [...] beneath every disturbance—whether it was called (*omina sub luna caduca*) Idea, Substance or, equally handy, Matter[—][t]he new philosophy [...] both despite and because of its real *Meta*, is by no standard just more old metaphysics. For its relationship to the Not-yet-manifest does not allow of the slightest hint of an ‘*ontos on[.]*’ of an ontology, therefore, that being inwardly agreed and settled as the Behind-there, has already got everything completely settled and behind it” (*Atheism* 66). Bloch’s ontology, if you will—recalling Percy Shelley’s “process” (Hogle) or Blake’s anti-Newtonian perspectivism (Ault)—sees the future open up in the very immanence of the void as the possibility of a real becoming. In Bloch’s words, “[t]he being that conditions consciousness, and the consciousness that processes being, is understood ultimately only out of that and in that form which and toward which it tends. Essential being is not Beenness; on the contrary: the essential being of the world lies itself on the Front” (*Hope* 18, Bloch’s emphasis). So rather than a predictive itinerary, Bloch’s form of prophecy breaks from conventional metaphysics insofar as that metaphysics relies both on a notion of Being’s plentitude or fullness and binds all possibility to the excavation of an immanent, universal Truth. That is, “the dialectically concrete Utopia and the Possibility—‘Substratum’—of the *Novum* does not belong to the old metaphysics with the reasonableness [...] of this simple binding-back, this bare *re-ligio*” (*Atheism* 69). Bloch adopts, rather, the “subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible [...] which, in the exodus from the static order, showed itself far more as pure protest, as the archetype of the Kingdom of Freedom itself,” though one that is, at the same time, “the abolition of every On-high which has no place for man; as a transcending with revolt, and equally a revolt with transcending—but without transcendence” (*Atheism* 69).

Reading the Bible, counterintuitively, as a protest *against* transcendence is for Bloch what marks the Hebrew shape of thought as essentially historical in contrast to the Greek or Hellenic thought that will be responsible, in part, for the conflation of Jesus as the “Son of Man” with Jesus as “Kyrios-Christos”—that is, a confusion between Jesus-

as-human, as described by the Apostles, and the universalized, deified form of Jesus-as-God.<sup>152</sup> The sense of thought's and being's constitutive incompleteness creates the condition for a concept of history that is not only fundamentally messianic but also temporalized: the future remains open and uncertain. Indeed, Bloch emphasizes that God describes himself not in terms of presence but in terms of possibility, necessitating temporal protraction: *Eh'je ascher eh'je*, "I will be what I will be." Hence, at its root, the Exodus impulse in the Bible is not mere restlessness or a lack of patience. Rather, it is the fundamental non-identity in the very concept of the Absolute itself. Exodus does not name merely the exit from one or another determinate, oppressive situation (although it does mean this too) but rather reflects the very principle or power of that movement. This includes the movement of history itself that opens not just a new future but a new concept of the future:

Exodus from every previous concept of Yahweh [i.e., any oppressive authority] was now possible, with this *Futurum* as the true mode-of-being of that which is thought of as God; more possible than it had ever been in all the interpolated promises to Abraham. The Bible-of-Exodus became possible: of Exodus away from and against the Pharaoh who, in the person of Yahweh himself, had made only Egypt, not Canaan—not the "new heaven and new earth." —In short: the rebellion, the prophetic witness, the Messianism of a no longer merely underground Bible has, in the Moriah of *Eh'je ascher eh'je*, broken half-way out into the light of freedom. (*Atheism* 92-93)

Just as active "contraries" ought not to be reduced to static, hierarchical "negations" in Blake—just as the state is always re-stated in imagination such that "Milton" is only ever a "State *about to be Created*" (35.27, my emphasis)—so this notion of Exodus ought not to be confused with something finally determinate, as if Exodus could exit from itself, could cancel itself and rest. As Bloch insists, "*this exodus is not one away from Exodus itself*" (*Atheism* 122). Rather, Exodus 'as such' is what defines the historical dimension of Hebrew thought. This is a tense negativity that Bloch, echoing Blanchot's description of

---

<sup>152</sup> "The *lordly, majestic* element of apocalyptic thought does, as we shall see, lead away from the innate humanness of the archetypal Son of Man; but there is still a long way to go to the later Hellenistic picture of the Kyrios-Christos who does not dwell among us, but descends upon us from on high" (*Atheism* 162).

prophetic speech as “a wandering speech” (*Book 79*), will describe as a “wandering Where-to, not only in the desert, but in time” (*Atheism 93*).

Bloch thus reads the Hebrew prophets as agents of this restless negativity of temporality—a force that is both deeply temporalizing and yet susceptible to repression. For even the more complex, dialectical historical paradigms tend toward the totalization of particularity insofar as they aim for some kind of explanatory power, a power that must be in some sense a generalization and (retroactive) organization. For Bloch, in other words, the Hebrew prophet, protesting the intolerable condition of the present, reveals the present’s relative contingency and instability, reveals the void of the not-yet-conscious that betrays the state’s claim to total rationality or plenitude, as if nothing other than the present state, in terms of its fundamental logic or universal grammar, were possible.<sup>153</sup> In a sense, this is to suggest that the concept of exodus becomes, in the prophets, a new form of genesis itself, as if to reverse the order of the first two books of the Hebrew Bible. For “the *verbum mirificum* of the one who founds and saves calls forth in the prophets the very creative essence of a World creator and infuses it into the promise of a very different Genesis—one which at last is just” (*Atheism 105*); it is the “awaited and not in any sense the remembered Genesis that blossoms forth” (*Atheism 105*) in the prophet’s (as it were) peripatetic locutions. And it is precisely this new sense of genesis itself—the ability of life to modify its own conditions or to determine itself to some degree autonomously—that marks Hebrew prophecy’s distinctive historicity. In contrast, Cassandra’s paralysed and paralysing relationship to history—she can see the future but is fated not to be believed by others—defines, for Bloch, the Greek concept of prophecy as a kind of tragic fatality, a “passive type of augury” (*Atheism 103*). That is, when Greek prophecy trades human finitude for timeless ideas—just as Greek thought tries to turn the merely human Jesus into a manifestation of a transcendent idea, the aforementioned Kyrios-Christos—it

---

<sup>153</sup> There is a tension between the possible and the impossible in history that the prophet serves to highlight. For there is a sense—following Žižek’s reading of Henri Bergson—that what is thought of initially as impossible (some kind of new future, say) is recognized as possible through history but only *retroactively*, such that history is always a rhythm where the “*simultaneously probable and impossible*” event is recast as the simultaneously “*real and possible*” actuality (Žižek 159). This suggests that possibility, oddly, opens up only after a certain foreclosure. And yet, the implication is not that possibility’s contingency is absorbed into total determination. Rather, more troublingly, if possibility’s ambivalent futurity can open up retroactively, then this suggests that what the State deems most stable—what is definitely prohibited—becomes, in fact, deeply uncanny in that this impossibility is identical with the possible.

sacrifices thought's active relationship with historical becoming. Cassandra can predict the future only insofar as she is rendered effectively impotent or passive. Bloch thus suggests that the difference between the Greek and Hebrew treatment of Jesus models the different attitude concerning the relationship between historical prediction and historical agency: the intensification of prophetic prediction undermines agency; positive knowledge is inversely related to effective praxis. Or, put differently, potential agency broadens precisely to the degree that the negativity of Exodus and the not-yet-conscious, the hallmarks of Hebrew historical 'consciousness,' suspend predictability.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, in the novels discussed below the Greek mode of prophecy is associated with disabling, sexualized violence and undercut by a second, Hebrew form of prophecy.

That is, in the Greek mode, as in all predictive itineraries, time is spatialized and history is reduced to the mere presentation of what always already is. In contrast, the Hebrew model—Bloch takes Jonah's prophecy as exemplary—enables active participation in determining one's own history:

The *specific prophetic* contribution to this order [...] lay in the idea of an *unstimulated cooperation of free moral choice in one's fate, right up to the very last*. This cooperation is like a new switching-over of the points, and it marks the difference between the prophet Jonah and the destruction of Nineveh which he averted (without, it is true, comprehending it), and the Greek "prophetess" Cassandra, who could only foresee the curse of the Atrides, without being able, by any appeal for conversion, to forestall it. It [i.e., Biblical prophecy] is the first preaching and proclamation of the moral trend which goes the *opposite way*: the *Novum* is here, right up to the point of "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and the almost theurgical words "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3.19f.). The prophets taught a mature freedom of choice extending even to fate; they taught the power of human decision. That is why they all speak of the future not as an immutable category but

---

<sup>154</sup> Consciousness is in quotation marks here as it is becoming clear that Hebrew prophecy and historiography is closely related to the non-conscious and even the unconscious.

hypothetically, as a changeable, chooseable one. (*Atheism* 102-103, Bloch's emphasis)

Put differently, the Hebrew form of prophecy introduces the possibility—and the complication—of a contingency that has historical, causal efficacy. While history might not be simply or directly manipulable, the Biblical prophet suggests that there is a complicated and somehow reciprocal relationship between determinate will and historical circumstances, or that at least cause cannot be located in a single overriding agent or force.

In the texts considered below, the female prophets act as historical critics by gesturing to the closures and systemic repudiations on which prevailing historical discourses rely. That is, the texts complicate the narrative coherence of Enlightenment and Romantic, dialectical history by complicating the place of women and female prophets in that narrative. Hence, despite the many differences in content between Lamb's *Glenarvon* and Shelley's *Valperga* and *The Last Man*, one vital similarity is that each text exposes how temporal discipline through universalizing narratives or official history is complicit with and even relies on disciplining the alterity of the female. For instance, Lamb's prophetess, Elinor St Clare, serves as a figure for Lamb's complex treatment of history as a material practice—a practice that constructs *Glenarvon* as a reliquary of private artefacts as well as a snapshot of the 1798 Irish rebellion. For just as St Clare rejects her own Cassandrian foresight in an effort to de-determine Irish history, so Lamb's tendency to over-saturate her narrative's history, to turn historical narrative into the effect of manifold and irreducibly overlapping causes, effectively dislocates anything like an Hegelian or Marxian concept of expressive historical causality. In this respect, Louis Althusser's discussion of historical overdetermination and structural causation offers a way to theorize Lamb's concept of history as a nascent critique of rational concepts of history in the nineteenth century. So, if *Glenarvon* is typically understood as a *roman à clef* about the scandalous affair between Lord Byron and Caroline Lamb—wife of the future Prime Minister of England—a closer look at how it complicates causation and historical representation suggests that the text's designation as a form of allegory is deeply misleading: for, Lamb, like Blake, displaces the closed economy of substitution by offering conflicting and competing material hypotexts. In this

way, Lamb's narrative makes a kind of Blochian exodus from the shadow of Byron and the one-sided history that has essentially foreclosed any literary reading of *Glenarvon*, treating it typically only as a footnote within the life of Byron.

In *Valperga*, Mary Shelley looks more closely at predictive, Greek prophecy in terms of a curse; again, for all their differences, this is a theme all three novels share. Indeed, through her treatment of Beatrice, the prophetess of Ferrara, Shelley takes this one step further, suggesting that prophecy is in fact politically and socially dangerous—as if the curse might be, like the plague in *The Last Man*, contagious. Hence, Beatrice and other prophetic characters in the text—in fact, all characters that seem to be associated with any kind of temporal determination, including even Pepi the usurer, who turns another kind of excessive 'profit'—are subject to hellish punishment. Indeed, what is odd is how excessively the text polices prophecy and other superstitions given its Medieval context. For while modern readers might understand predictive prophecy as kind of superstition, the sense of an integrated, unified, or essentially completed time seems consistent with the universe depicted in Dante's *Comedia*: a worldview that *Valperga* explicitly invokes in the text's opening pages. Hence, *Valperga*'s hostility toward prophecy can be read symptomatically as an indication that prophecy is beginning, in the historical moment depicted, to emerge as a *supplement*. The logic of the supplement in the context of prophecy, as argued throughout this study, suggests that the rise of prophecy as a predictive mechanism is coextensive with the intensification of the discontinuity it is intended to ameliorate; if prophecy is called on to supplement the sense of historical regularity, this solicitation and supplementation hints at a more profound gap or deficiency in the discourse of history itself. Hence, Shelley's treatment of Beatrice and other prophetic figures exposes how the male-dominated institutions charged with historical disciplinarily—in every sense—become almost schizophrenic: in their attempts to repudiate the very supplement they solicit to reinforce the sense of social and political coherence that is revealing itself more and more as the incoherent will-to-power of tyrannical men, these institutions wish both to eliminate and to ignore the evidence of their own failure as institutions. When the text aims to eliminate its own prophetic symptoms this only, ironically, draws more attention to prophets *as* symptoms and to the hypocrisy behind this attempted elimination.

Finally, Shelley frames *The Last Man* in terms of sibylline prophecy. In so doing, she places her text within a particularly disabling concept of prophecy that highlights the connection between the perfect determination—that is, elimination—of contingency and sexualized violence. As the myth of the Sibyl (discussed below) illustrates, rational and universal history relies on literally disciplining female ‘irrationality.’ Indeed, within the novel’s narrative, Evadne, echoing Virgil’s Dido, represents the threat of female desire—a threat that bears directly on ideologies of nation and state-building as the material instantiation and perpetuation of reason. For it is no accident that Evadne, hailing from Greece, is the mysterious architect whose designs for the state’s archive—that is, a new national gallery—fascinate Raymond. Raymond’s rejection of Evadne thus repeats the repudiation of femininity and female desire that forms the very foundation—figuratively *and* literally, in this case—of the political state. Shelley, however, refuses to allow this treatment to pass unnoticed. Hence, what the plague unleashes is something like what Kant calls “natural revolution” (*Conflict* 161): a disorder so fundamental that it threatens not only all rational projects but even the project of reason itself, the promise of the eventual unity of ‘faculties.’

So, if *The Last Man* aims in some measure to validate female sexuality, this is not accomplished through fictional wish fulfilment or utopian scenarios. Shelley, rather, seems intent *not* to frame her project in terms of utopia. Unlike Percy, there is here no Promethean Age. Unlike Blake, there is no redemption—even if that concept of redemption is radically reformulated as self-exposure. This is because utopian framing would only reiterate a disabling ideology: something elaborated on in detail through the violent attack on the faculty of imagination in both *Valperga* and *The Last Man*. Rather, *The Last Man* functions as history’s purgative. Shelley’s text is not a completely depressing vision of humanity; despite appearances, she does not simply detail the victory of entropy wherein the world ends with a whimper. Rather, she imagines a total historical catharsis: Shelley’s fictional spelunkers and actual readers are able to experience the end—as both *completion* and *elimination*—of a particular form of history or ideology by living through it fictionally. This is why the frame of the narrative in *The Last Man* is so important: in stark contrast to Cassandra’s curse or Beatrice’s fate—that is, in contrast to the form of prophecy that dominates history *inside* each narrative—the

subject outside the frame is, in fact, in the position of Jonah, one witnessing an immanent yet only possible future. Greek prophecy is here encased in Hebraic prophecy, catalyzing a negative dialectic where the negativity of total depopulation is, itself, negated. That is, while Evadne's Greek or Cassandrian prophecy<sup>155</sup> negates the rationality of the state and the progressive history articulated by the state, her prophecy is itself negated. Recalling both Kierkegaard and Bloch, this double negation constitutes the infinite absolute negativity that suspends the actual world, opens an exodus from the state (of history), and becomes the concept of hope.

What Althusser in his "Letter on Art" says of Tolstoy, Balzac, and Solzhenitsyn could be said equally of Lamb and Shelley's texts. What these authors have in common is that they "give us a 'view' of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a *retreat*, an *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which from which their novels emerged. They make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held" (204, Althusser's emphasis). As aesthetic productions, Lamb and Shelley's texts are not perhaps explicit critiques of history; and yet, the works under consideration use prophecy to gesture toward their own histories in strange and provocative ways. Like the repetition of "here...here" in "Home at Grasmere" discussed in chapter two, the emphasis in these works on their respective historical situations has an oddly alienating effect. That is, this gesturing creates a shutter or syncopation between historical cause and effect—between the conditions and relations of (historical) production—that opens a space for thinking about history *as* ideology. This tremor promises not an escape from ideology so much as the possibility of an immanent critique of the historical discourses within which each text must work. In contrast to Wordsworthian harmony, this syncopation or non-identity within cultural productions—this immanent Exodus in Bloch's terms—represents the persistent irritation performed by temporality's transcendence without transcendence. Hence, one can frame the critique of

---

<sup>155</sup> Barbara Jane O'Sullivan's "Beatrice in *Valperga*: A New Cassandra" helps to bring out Shelley's abiding interest in the figure of Cassandra across several of her texts. But where O'Sullivan reads Shelley's "Cassandra complex" (140) as a calculated pessimism—"the prophetess is a tragic character whose example is ultimately debilitating rather than liberating" (142)—intended to undercut Percy Shelley's optimism, my reading tends rather to see Mary Shelley invoking but also actively *negating* this disabling mode of prophecy. This becomes a way to reintroduce Bloch's principle of hope: a kind of negativity that can be critical and yet still optimistic.



history-as-ideology in terms of the ambivalence constitutive of prophecy, wherein prophecy's predictive exigency is displaced by prophecy's ironic 'foundation' in an acute sense of historical discontinuity, revolt, and revolution.

## II. Splitting Heirs in *Glenarvon*

In contrast to a brand of historical fiction that weaves fictional plots around actual historical figures and events without essentially questioning or displacing history itself, Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* formulates history in terms of idolatry. That is, history no longer serves as a stable background but becomes fetishized: history is objectified and treated explicitly as a discourse of mystified veneration. Lamb does this in order to draw attention to and undermine what Blake calls "Priesthood" (*Marriage* 11): to remind culture that its deified values are in fact "genetic" in Nietzsche's sense—that is, produced in and through human, not divine, agencies. Hence, throughout *Glenarvon*, historical material is quite ironically collected in a reliquary and put on display. The consciousness with which this is done suggests less that the novel falls victim to fetishism than that Lamb, in a very canny and Byronic move, draws attention to social mechanisms of self-delusion including history's self-legitimizing narratives. Most importantly, though, Lamb's historical idolatry does not ultimately culminate in a reassertion of authenticity: the idol is not replaced with the icon, history's relativity and plasticity are not cancelled by a new transcendence. Rather, history thus fractured from any appeal to the iconography of Natural Law reveals the prophetic negativity of temporality that enables what Bloch, above, described as transcendence without transcendence. With its own form of double voice—one both vengeful and humorous, and encapsulated, as discussed below in more detail, in the rhetorical form of the pun—*Glenarvon* experiments with different ways that history and aesthetic production relate to each other. The text, in other words, thematizes the more and more ambiguous causality that emerges within a hopelessly idolatrous economy of representation, something noticeable in the novel's strangely distant intimacy with the 1798 Irish Rebellion. Moreover, *Glenarvon* formalizes the problem of historical cause and effect by incorporating material remainders from Lamb's affair with Byron—objects that in effect *are* Byron insofar as Byronic identity becomes

absorbed in a growing celebrity economy—and casting the text as an irreverent reliquary of these non-totalizable fragments.

As John Clubbe notes, “twentieth-century readers” of Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* “have not dealt kindly with the novel” (208). The treatment is understandable. For even if one hesitates to dismiss the text outright, as earlier critics have, as “the product of hysteria” (Chew 141) or “diseased sexuality” (McDayter 156), the work remains a clumsy melodrama populated by shallow, often one-dimensional characters. While Clubbe promotes a return to the text, he still considers *Glenarvon*’s value to be its “biographical and social” insight, the novel gaining a merely derivative value as a “portrait of Byron” (208). Beginning in the early 1990s, a series of studies by people like Peter Graham, Malcolm Kelsall, Gary Kelly, and Duncan Wu expanded Lamb’s profile and looked more closely at how she appropriates Byron’s own style and persona. While often insightful, these works still characterize Lamb as Byron’s parasite. Most recently, work by Clara Tuite, Leigh Dickson, and Paul Douglass (whose three-volume *Works of Caroline Lamb* was published just last year [2009]) have considered how the materiality of the Byron-Lamb affair informs both of their literary productions: Douglass, for instance, argues that Lamb wrote “with an understanding of the economic market place and readers’ expectations” (xvi), that she was much more calculating than has hitherto been acknowledged. By loosening—though not severing—the bond between Lamb and Byron, Douglass affords Lamb a wider range of concerns and opens her *oeuvre* to new hermeneutic experiments. In this vein, Dickson suggests that Lamb’s primary concern is the “Whig aristocracy” and her own “historical moment of cultural production” (371, 370); and Ghislaine McDayter gestures toward Lamb’s investment in Romantic “politics and philosophy” (162). Building on this trend, it is fruitful to look more closely at Lamb’s treatment of history and historical representation in *Glenarvon*. For while Lamb adopts a Byronic stance toward historical representation, her concern is not exclusively with the representation of Byron (in her text and more widely) but with, in Lamb’s language, a certain concept of “idolatry” as historiography.

Lamb experiments with a concept of idolatry and a practice of material collection throughout *Glenarvon* that adapts the complex form of identity that Byron calls “mobility” and which he defines, in a note to *Don Juan*, as “an excessive susceptibility of

immediate impression" (1071 n869). "Mobility" describes a kind of contagious personality, the notion that identity, in Jerome McGann's words, "involves a structure of social relations" (40) and remains receptive to changes in social contexts. This atomization of the subject complements the growth of what Tom Mole terms the "branded identity" (16) of Romantic celebrity. In contrast to idealist notions of subjectivity as perfect self-appropriation, the Byronic subject seems, increasingly, to be distributed throughout culture and to become radically susceptible to misappropriation, plagiarism, or piracy. That is, the self is neither completely particular nor completely universal but rather hovers between the two extremes, like what John Plotz calls a "portable property," a "third term between 'abstract commodity' and 'autochthonous thing'" (17). This mobility deconstructs the binary between proper and improper self-appropriation by re-conceiving subjectivity as always already misappropriated, as radically absorbed by a set of socio-cultural relations outside the subject's total control. Hence, if this absorption is the norm, if misappropriation defines the proper self, then one must suspend the pejorative prefix, the mis-: misappropriation implies transgression only because it implicitly retains a metaphysical nostalgia for proper self-possession as the ground of the authentic self, the self *as* property.

When identity is thus unmoored—or, rather, moored in a more complex, nebulous, and indeed concrete way—the concept of sincerity changes in a manner that has implications for matters of historical representation. Given no single, self-contained essence against which to gauge *dissimulation*, the subject enters into a play of pure *simulation*, a situation where a "mask" covers not a face but only another mask. Hence, sincerity metamorphoses into a kind of fidelity to contingency; what is most sincere is nothing other than the subject's responsiveness to his or her surroundings. In fact, it is the subject's attitude toward this version of social being that re-situates ethical determinations. For, as McGann notes, not all "lying" amounts to "cant": "lying" betrays an awareness of the melancholy of simulation, whereas cant, like a recalcitrant dogmatist, "reifies these deceptions" (McGann 69). Ultimately, idolatry, as developed in *Glenarvon*, is in the historiographical register what Byron's notion of sincere lying is in the ethical register. Idolatry, in Lamb's hands, names a kind of representation that resists the closure imposed by transcendent notions of identity. It is intensely anti-mimetic. That is, Lamb's

‘idolatry’ is a form of appearance that is *not* anxious about how it misrepresents essence because it displaces the very metaphysics *of* appearance/essence. Like Hegel’s translation of the Kantian Thing into the negative moment in a dialectical process, or Blake’s rejection of a Newtonian universe in favor of a more phenomenological sense that reality is consciousness’ complex activity, Lamb does not valorize idolatry’s conventional, pejorative sense as a deficient form of representation but aims rather to displace the conventional logic of re-presentation itself. Just as Blake retains a healthy suspicion of any claim made by a single, overriding agent to determine history, so would Lamb view such claims to truth as the most reprehensible cant: a reification that denies the simulation that produces its putative truth. In fact, Lamb’s idolatry anticipates a concept of history that could be glossed, following Louis Althusser, as a “*process without a subject [...] or goal(s)*” (*Essays* 56): history as a phenomenon that cannot be explained as simply the effect of a final or an efficient cause.<sup>156</sup>

As discussed in more detail below, Althusser’s theorization of causality represents a critique of the totalizing exigency found in modern concepts of history based on some form of expressive causality or the notion that history’s events are expressions of a rational, transcendent order, code, or Spirit.<sup>157</sup> This is especially apparent in comparison

---

<sup>156</sup> “We are forced to say in this connexion that scientific history, like all history, is a *process without a subject*, and that scientific knowledge (even when it is the work of a particular individual scientist, etc) is actually the historical result of a process which has no real subject or goal(s). That is how it is with Marxist science” (*Essays* 56).

<sup>157</sup> In *Reading Capital*, Althusser will insist that “Marxism is not a Historicism” precisely because he sees historicism’s claims to ground its existence as a science on Absolute Knowledge as hopelessly ideological. Early in his fifth chapter Althusser writes:

I should like to suggest that, from the theoretical stand-point, Marxism is no more an historicism than it is a humanism [...]; that in many respects both historicism and humanism depend on the same ideological problematic; and that, *theoretically speaking*, Marxism is, in a single movement and by virtue of the unique epistemological which established it, an anti-humanism and an anti-historicism. Strictly speaking, I ought to say an a-humanism and an a-historicism. (119)

Later, Althusser explains in more detail why Gramsci’s notion of Marxism as an “absolute historicism” marks an effort only to de-transcendentalize Marx’s lingering Hegelianism, not to historicize Marxism in accordance with Hegelian concepts of history. That is, Marxist history, or historical materialism, must for Althusser abdicate any claim to explain history rationally in a linear narrative of cause and effect, precisely because the notion of a guiding cause or Spirit that expresses itself in particular forms of consciousness is too “pure”—is thus a false, ideological image that covers as much as it discloses the political unconscious of class conflict, alienation, and legal violence:

If Marxism is an absolute historicism, it is because it historicizes even what was peculiarly the theoretical and practical negation of history for Hegelian historicism: the end of history, the unsurpassable present of Absolute Knowledge. In absolute historicism there is no longer any Absolute Knowledge, and hence no end for history.

to Winckelmann. As Meinecke writes, “Winckelmann’s new historical sense was already in evidence in his discovery of a succession of styles in art, and the connections between the life of art and the whole life of a nation, particularly with its political destinies. In making this discovery, it is maintained, he superseded both the hitherto prevailing antiquarian approach to works of art, as well as the more reflective and argumentative” (240). In other words, Winckelmann is in the vanguard of German historical thought because such thought is predicated upon the notion that history expresses the immanent coherence of a period—the “spirit” of a particular people in a particular moment. For Althusser, however, this “expressive causality” is precisely the problem with the nineteenth-century concept of historicism: “the Marxist does not have the same structure as the Hegelian totality, and in particular it contains different levels or instances which do not directly express one another” (Althusser *Reading* 132). As Jameson notes, according to Althusser, “any rewarding use of the notion of a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, ‘expresses’ some unified inner truth” (27). Hence, Jameson reads Althusser’s dictum, above cited, that “history is a process without a *telos* or a subject” as “a repudiation of such master narratives and their twin categories of narrative closure (*telos*) and of character (subject of history)” (29). This is not to suggest that Althusser rejects history as such; rather, he will insist on displacing rather than

---

There is no longer any privileged present in which the totality becomes visible and legible in an “essential section,” in which consciousness and science coincide. The fact that there is no Absolute Knowledge—which is what makes the historicism *absolute*—means that Absolute Knowledge itself is historical. (132)

Absolute Knowledge is absolute for Hegel not because thought comes to an end but rather because thought understands itself, is perfectly self-relating. For Althusser, such perfect self-relation as the basis for any analysis of history amounts to something like the Marxian superstructure determining the base, abstract thought determining actual relations, which in fact obscures the complexity of competing, contingent motives in actual reality. Hence, if the social, political sphere can be thought of as some kind of totality in Marxism, it “does not have the same structure as the Hegelian totality, and in particular it contains different levels or instances which do not directly express one another” (132). Hence, Hegelian Absolute Knowledge does not represent a *static* totality or the *end* of thought and of history in the sense of apocalyptic destruction. Rather, it represents the complete explication of the grammar of thought and of history such that thought and history will continue *within* the closure of the end, an end without and ending. Yet, if the Absolute does not achieve totality in the sense of a finished actuality, it does impose a relatively simple concept of historical dialectics such that Hegel maintains a kind of totalization at the level of cause or Spirit, claiming that that totalization describes the space of thought and history and cannot be displaced. For the unity of this Spirit is absolute precisely because it sees no relation outside of itself—it is *ab-solute* (“without relation”) since it claims to account for all determination or to embody all determining force in itself.

merely inverting Hegel's dialectic by illustrating how contradiction as such is massively "overdetermined" (Althusser *For Marx* 101). History thus acquires, retroactively, the appearance of totality and yet remains internally fragmented since, as Jameson points out, historical phenomena relate "by way of their structural *difference* and distance from one another, rather than by their ultimate identity" (Jameson 41).<sup>158</sup>

Lamb tends in a similar direction insofar as her text displaces the ostensibly allegorical ("expressive") dimension of the *roman à clef* in favour of a more nebulous, Althusserian understanding of cause and effect. Lamb displaces Hegelian synthesis—and even the Marxian notion of determination "in the last instance" by economic forces—by thematizing the parallel and irreducible histories at the level of *Glenarvon's* process of production. Starting from a similar sense of history's irreducibly complex or overdetermined nature, Althusser rejects both mechanical and expressive cause and develops a concept of structural causality. In this model, cause is qualitatively different from effect but is effectively *coincident* with its effect, becoming something—to use a Kantian or Foucaultian turn—like the condition of possible effects. In Lamb's treatment, if cause can be understood in this way, as the conditions of production within a particular historical moment, she too emphasizes how these conditions are impossible perfectly to stabilize, making it impossible perfectly to map the relationship between cause and effect and to reduce history to a single narrative arc. Any attempt to produce a snapshot of the relations of production in historical life would be double, triple, or perhaps infinitely (over) exposed. This is not to say that cause does not exist or function: cultural products can indeed be thought of as the effects of some kind of causal network. It is, however, impossible perfectly to determine this relationship, impossible to eliminate the reflexive influence of such 'productions,' and therefore impossible entirely to quarantine effects

---

<sup>158</sup> In *For Marx*, Althusser calls the Hegelian version of contradiction "the 'weakest link'" (94) in Hegel's historiography because in Hegel the terms in contradiction oppose each other in an ideal space, unencumbered by the range of forces that in reality muddy the simplicity of such opposition. Indeed that muddiness could be called ideology—or rather, the failure to see and to acknowledge the muddiness or distortion itself is ideological. That is, what is ideological or misleading about Hegel's understanding of the relationship between terms in contradiction—what could in Marxian terms be glossed as, say, class conflict, or the gap between the conditions and the relations of production—is that an "Hegelian contradiction is never *really overdetermined*" since it overlooks how "the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from the formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the *instances* it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates" (101).

from causes. In other words, Lamb's version of structural causality—like her treatment of idolatry—is not a skeptical endorsement of mere contingency or arbitrariness but rather suggests that any simplification of the relationship between history and historical representation is an ideological error. Rather, history's overdetermination means that there always remains an obscure kernel of inassimilable negativity, a kernel that amounts to the very preserve of the possible within the actual. Causal overdetermination as a form of indeterminacy becomes the condition for the possible re-determination of the socio-cultural scene—for the possible revolution of prevailing logics—by complicating the nature of causation itself.

In order to understand how Lamb's ironic treatment of idolatry and causality inform her historical sensibility, it is necessary to look at the social and material conditions of *Glenarvon*'s production. Lamb's novel, published in May of 1816, was an immediate success in large part because it was an enormous scandal. For readers soon recognized the text as a code. To be sure, "the popularity of *Glenarvon* rested on the widespread assumption that it described [Lamb's] relations with Byron"—a well-founded assumption since "it includes Byron's letter announcing the end of their affair" (Wu 143). Byron had an intense if brief affair with Lamb in the summer of 1812. The relationship and its aftermath were full of theatrical scenes that seem to find their way, obliquely, into *Glenarvon*'s narrative, suggesting some kind of complex causality. It was also a relationship full of rather odd exchanges of material objects—a materiality emphasized in Lamb's decision to paste Byron's actual letters into her text, attributing them to *Glenarvon*. For instance, Lamb's gift of her own pubic hair and request for Byron's reciprocation is one particular exchange critics have enjoyed recalling. In fact, Byron, taking advantage of the similarity between his own and Lady Oxford's hair, responded with a prank, returning his newest paramour's hair in place of his own. Writing to Lady Melbourne, he refers to this as the "double hair" (*Letters* 3.37) episode. While there are several other material artifacts—a miniature portrait, rings, buttons, *et cetera*—involved in Lamb and Byron's correspondence, it is important to single out the hair, specifically, for two reasons. First, it is an organic, bodily token that gestures toward the status of *Glenarvon* as a reliquary. As a reliquary, however, *Glenarvon* does not amount to a sentimental mourning of Byron's absence. Rather, the work undermines history's claim

to internal coherence and the common assumption that material objects are somehow more reliable for historians, since these objects acquire complex and conflicting valorizations that cannot be reduced to their mere objectivity. Second, it forms the basis for the plot structure in *Glenarvon*—a recognition that helps not only to set the novel's tone but radically to revise conventional expectations concerning the relationship between historical, material conditions as causes for aesthetic, fictional effects.

The aim here is to consider two 'levels' of history—levels, however, that form not a stable, hierarchical scheme (as in a simplified Marxism's base-superstructure model) but that tend rather to (un)ground each other. First is the cultural history of *Glenarvon*'s construction through Lamb's practice of material collection: this includes the trinkets and charms from her affair with Byron that make their way into her text. Second is the treatment of history in *Glenarvon*, understood, specifically, as a kind of deconstructed idolatry—that is, a form of idolism that actively rejects the metaphysics that would reduce idolatry to a false or deficient mode of representation. The important question becomes how these two 'levels' of history communicate with each other or how they are mediated. For the effort to synthesize the history of and the history in *Glenarvon* demands a concept of history that breaks radically from providential models of historical representation as well as from Enlightenment forms of historiography that insist on a qualitative distinction between history and romance. In other words, the importance of looking at the material conditions of *Glenarvon*'s production is not so much to 'explain' the relationship between the work's content and its historical context, as to re-consider the very nature of that relationship.

*Glenarvon* is set in Ireland during the 1790s and explicitly maps its narrative onto important historical events such as the third Battle of Ushant, on June 1, 1794, the battle of Camperdown, on October 11, 1797, and, more broadly, the Irish Rebellion of 1798. The plot, however, focuses on what might seem to be, given its setting, a relatively peripheral history: the seduction of the fictional Calantha Delaval, daughter of the Duke of Altamonte, by the charismatic and mysterious leader of the United Irishmen, Lord Glenarvon. With a typically Gothic series of deceptions, the text slowly unfolds Glenarvon's participation—via his alter-ego, Viviani—in a plot concocted by Calantha's aunt, Lady Margaret, to ensure that the Duke's estate is entailed to her son, Buchanan, by



murdering Albert, Calantha's brother and the Duke's infant heir. That is, Lady Margaret hopes her son Buchanan will marry Calantha—to whom, as the only child, the estate would be entailed—thereby acquiring legal access to a wealth that Lady Margaret would otherwise be excluded from. Rather than kill the child, however, Glenarvon-Viviani has a peasant's child murdered in his place and sends the heir to Italy to be raised in secret by his associate, Count Gondimar. But when Lady Margaret rejects Glenarvon's romantic advances despite his services, he palliates his ego through various conquests, seducing and betraying first the prophetess Elinor St Clare (discussed below in more detail), then Calantha, and finally the Irish nation as a whole. For not only does he lure Calantha into an adulterous affair only to abandon her but also, upon regaining his hereditary titles, he turns traitor and joins the English campaign against the very rebels he helped to organize, including St. Clare, from whom he had already romantically detached himself.

As this plot might suggest, Lamb's text is comical and witty rather than hysterical. That is, she turns Byron's "double hair" prank discussed above into her own "double heir" plot. In fact she doubles the doubling, as both Albert and Glenarvon represent 'doubled' heirs: in each case the authentic heir is replaced by a similar-looking but inauthentic other. With an absurdity reflecting a certain cool and measured reflection, Lamb entertains a pun at the heart of her text that both reflects and redeploys the complex history of material exchange with Byron. In other words, while one might hesitate to agree with Jeffery Cass that *Glenarvon's* transgressiveness lies in its allusion to and promotion of the stoicism embodied by Calantha's namesake in John Ford's *The Broken Heart* (1633), an awareness of Lamb's humor, nevertheless, helps to free *Glenarvon* from its characterization as a purely reactive, sentimental work that derives all its value, negatively, from Byron. In fact the pun, as the rhetorical or structural model for the relationship between history and romance—a model that reflects a more nebulous concept of causality—helps illuminate the odd way that Lamb both highlights and diminishes the place of Irish history in her text.

*Glenarvon* seems conflicted in terms of its investment in Irish politics and history—a conflict that bears precisely on the question of prophecy taken in Bloch's terms as the immanent negativity of historical revolution. That is, the text appears willing both to entertain its own determination by historical circumstances and yet to reserve a

kind of veto, a power simply to detach itself from those conditions, that is represented most explicitly by the prophets in the text, Camioli and Elinor St Clare. Elinor is the daughter of Camioli, a man “who, misled by a fine but wild imagination, which raised him too far above the interests of common life, had squandered away his small inheritance; and had long roved through the world, rapt in poetic visions, foretelling, as he pretended, to those who would hear him, that which futurity would more fully develop” (5). Camioli, however, considers his own gifts, his “comprehensive view [of] the universal plan of nature—unnumbered systems performing their various but distinct courses, unclouded by mists, and unbounded by horizon—endless variety in infinite space!” (6), to be a kind of curse. Upon leaving the infant Elinor to be raised by his brother and sister-in-law, Camioli prays, “may the God of Mercy avert from you the heaviest of all my calamities, the power of looking into futurity” (6). In fact, Camioli wields this strange power as a weapon when, years later, an embittered Elinor threatens to ignore his requests for a deathbed interview: “oh hasten [Elinor]; for in the frantic agony of his [i.e., Camioli’s] soul, he has cursed thee; and if thou dost not obey the summons, with the last breath of departing life, he will bequeath thee his malediction [i.e., his gift of prophecy]” (282). And indeed he does curse her with the ‘gift,’ his only heritable property: “your father’s spirit has forsaken him: there is no recall from the grave. With his last words he bequeathed his curse to the favourite of his heart; and death has set its seal upon the legacy. The malediction of a father rest upon an ungrateful child!” (283).

The damaging element of the curse here seems to be that Elinor is tied to a destructive fate, one she is, terribly, able to see in advance and yet can do nothing to alter.<sup>159</sup> As in the case of Cassandra, mentioned above, Apollo’s penetrating and all-illuminating light has become completely transfixing. In fact, the restrictive nature of this inheritance emerges as a motto early in the text: “He [Avondale] now perceived the bracelet on the floor of the room she [Calantha] had just quitted: and looking upon it, read, without being able to comprehend, the application of the inscription, ‘*Stesso sangue, Stessa sorte* [the same blood, the same fate]’” (26). Prophecy, as prediction or total determination, is here linked to blood and the body, suggesting a kind of biological

---

<sup>159</sup> Early in the text, a gypsy reads Calantha’s palm and accurately determines that she will “meet, unwept, an early end” (76). Fortune, in this way, becomes especially tyrannous.

determinism that recalls God's tyrannical curses in the Old Testament that would damn families through several generations. The veto, however, that grinds against this oppressive sense of inevitability resides in the plot's ambiguous and ambivalent relationship to the Irish Rebellion. For just as the Rebellion, according to several historical sources, could likely have been successful—had, for instance, bad weather not blown the *Fraternité*, carrying General Hoche, “out into the Atlantic” (Elliott 324) or if the remaining commanders, sitting off the shore near Ireland's Bantry Bay, decided to invade with the substantial forces they had available—and just as the history of Ireland, England, and France might then have been radically different from its eventual course, so does *Glenarvon* flirt with revolution and appear unwilling to commit its own narrative to one particular course of events. That is, the text enjoys its proximity to the furor and uncertainty of the Rebellion without necessarily absorbing an historical narrative that, by 1812, would be, at least in Ireland, a well-known tragedy. This flirtation takes shape in, as mentioned, the plot's cautious willingness to frame itself within the political and historical terms of Ireland in the 1790s. For instance, *Glenarvon's* return to Ireland has, according to Buchanan, entirely political grounds: “he [i.e., Buchanan] then talked of Ireland; described the dreadful, the exaggerated accounts of what had occurred there; and ended by assuring Gondimar, that the young *Glenarvon* was not dead, but was at this time at Belfont, concealed there with no other view than that of heading the rebels” (81).

This places *Glenarvon* at the centre of the Rebellion. In fact, Lamb seems quite explicitly to parallel *Glenarvon* with Wolf Tone, the eloquent leader of the United Irishmen famous for his 1791 pamphlet, *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, aiming to unite Irish Protestants and Catholics against the common foe: English occupation. In fact, upon returning to Castle Deleva from her extended stay in London, Calantha mentions an address written, historically, by Tone but attributed in the narrative to *Glenarvon*:

Lady Augusta, eager to talk, exclaimed—“Did you meet any of the patrol [sic]?” “Possibly—but I was reading the address to the United Irishmen, and could see, therefore, and think of nothing else” [said Calantha]. “Are you aware who is the author?” “No: but it is so eloquent, so animated, I was quite alarmed when I thought how it must affect the people.” “You

shock me, Calantha,” said Mrs. Seymour. “The absurd rhapsody you mean, is neither eloquent nor animating: it is a despicable attempt to subvert the government, a libel upon the English, and a poor piece of flattery to delude the infatuated malcontents in Ireland.” Lady Augusta winked at Calantha, as if informing her that she touched upon a sore subject. “The author,” said Lady Trelawney, who affected to be an enthusiast, “is Lord Glenarvon.” (101)<sup>160</sup>

The history of the Rebellion is not limited to Glenarvon’s organization of the United Irishmen.<sup>161</sup> The text makes a concerted effort to map its narrative over the military struggles of the 1790s, as when the Delevals and company are invited to “dine on board the Royal William on the [1<sup>st</sup>] of June, in commemoration of that day and its success” (139).<sup>162</sup> One can here deduce the date of the narrative—something otherwise somewhat difficult to do—as June 1, 1795, one year after the so-called “Glorious First of June” or Third Battle of Ushant: the first and largest naval battle between France and England, in 1794. Moreover, the text’s climax coincides with Camperdown, a battle that signalled the end of any real possibility of French aid to Irish rebels. The narrator in *Glenarvon* recalls the projected itinerary of the French-controlled Dutch fleet: “the armament which had

---

<sup>160</sup> While it is difficult to say precisely which text Lamb is attributing to Glenarvon, it is one likely originally written by Tone since he acted as the first and most eloquent propagandist for the Irish Nationalist movement at this time. His *Argument* pamphlet, “printed [...] by the United Irish Society,” had “6,000 sales by early 1792,” numbers that “put it in the best-seller league” and necessitated a second run of “a further 10,000” (Elliott 129). If this work made Tone famous across Ireland, it may, however, be more likely that Lady Augusta refers in this particular instance to his next major document, published in the fall of 1791: “Declaration and Resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast.” While brief, Tone’s text is a forceful and effective plea for an acknowledgement of the right to Irish self-government. Through allusions to Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*—Tone met Paine in 1797 (Elliott 325)—and Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Tone identifies and denounces the injustice of foreign political occupation and calls for (at this point, non-violent) revolution. Tone was also behind the 1796 “invasion manifesto” (Elliott 311), entitled “Address to the People of Ireland.” The document was to be issued to the Irish public “immediately upon [the French military] landing disavowing all idea of conquest, offering security and protection to religious property and inviting the people to form a national convention which in turn would establish a government” (Elliott 292). At any rate, it seems clear that what Lady Augusta calls “the address to the United Irishmen” would likely allude to Tone’s work generally and perhaps to “Declaration and Resolutions” specifically.

<sup>161</sup> There are several additional references to the United Irishmen, including Glenarvon’s gift to Calantha of a ring with an “emerald [and] a harp engraved upon it—the armorial bearing of Ireland: ‘let us be firm and united,’ was written under. ‘I mean it merely politically,’ he said smiling” (159).

<sup>162</sup> In the Dickson and Douglass edition, the editors note that Lamb confuses the dates from one edition to the next, occasionally giving the event the date of the 4<sup>th</sup> of June rather than the 1<sup>st</sup>. However, Dickson and Douglass make an odd choice, giving the date in the text they produce as the 4<sup>th</sup> when the battle in question happened, in fact, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June. Aside from the comedic effect this has on a date that is that is called “memorable” (139), it also suggests something about the way Lamb is both specific and yet casual about her text’s relationship to recorded history.

been fitted out on the part of the Batavian Republic, sailed at a later period of the same year, under the command of Admiral De Winter, with the intention of joining the French fleet at Brest, and proceeding from thence to Ireland, where the discontents and disaffection were daily increasing, and all seemed ripe for immediate insurrection” (313). According to received history, by this time the offensive was far too little and too late to be effective:

It was the recognition of Holland’s poor showing in the war which had forced a reluctant De Winter out of the Texel on 7 October [1797]. The sailing was senseless. [...]. The fleet had sailed, it seemed, for no purpose other than to prove Dutch mettle in direct combat with the English. On 11 October it duly met Duncan’s greatly superior force and was severely defeated within sight of the Dutch coast at the battle of Camperdown. The Dutch fleet was decimated. Only 13 ships returned of the 27 which had sailed; 9 of the original ships of the line were lost or captured, among them the *Vrijheid*, taken with the green flag [Wolf] Tone was to have hoisted in Ireland. (Elliott 361-362)

In what looks like a final, ideological showdown, Lamb appropriates official history and pits Glenarvon (now fighting *for* the English) and Buchanan against the hopes of Irish emancipation: “Lord Glenarvon was at St Alvin Priory, when he was summoned to take the command of his frigate, and join Sir George Buchanan and Admiral Duncan at the Texel” (313).

The impression generated by splicing the political and historical investments of *Glenarvon* together is, however, quite misleading. For the text routinely distances itself from official history, asserting, for instance, that “the preparations made this year by France, in conjunction with the allies, and the great events which took place in consequence of her enterprises”—in other words, the novel’s historical climax—“belong solely to the province of the historian” (313). It is as if the novel seeks to withhold itself from the very history it so decidedly places itself within. More specifically, the text maintains more than one ‘history,’ running at least two distinct yet parallel plot lines: Glenarvon’s duplicity—his existence as Viviani—involves a separate set of motives and interests that centre on Lady Margaret and develop in terms of romantic blackmail. The

split persona allows the plot to entertain two different paths of commitment that ultimately relativize one another, each offering a kind of exit for or exodus from—to borrow Bloch’s term—the other. Indeed, just as Althusser will talk of the “*relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*” (*For Marx* 111), so Lamb’s history hovers between different levels of relations. For, as much as *Glenarvon* concerns political betrayal and invests itself in the extant history of the Irish Rebellion, it is equally invested in a fictional, semi-counterhistorical romance—“semi” counterhistorical since it is complexly related to Lamb’s personal history and her affair with Byron. Indeed, the duplicity at the level of the text’s plot renders in formal and narrative terms the prophetess Elinor’s final, dramatic repudiation of predictability. In a particularly powerful scene toward the end of the novel, Elinor rejects the determinism and fate she has been cursed to inherit. After singing some lines from “The Exile of Erin,” a popular Irish ballad, Elinor prepares her exit from history in a moment not merely of self-blinding but of total self-destruction, repudiating the ‘clarity’ her family name, St Clare, entails:

As she sung the last strain of the song, which the sons of freedom had learned, she tore the green mantle from her breast, and throwing it around the head of her steed, so that he could not perceive any external object, she pressed the spur into his sides, and galloped in haste toward the edge of the cliff, from which she beheld, like a sheet of fire reddening the heavens, the blazing turrets of Belfont. She heard the crash: she gazed in triumph, as millions of sparks lighted the blue vault of the heavens; and volumes of smoke, curling from the ruins, half concealed the ravages of the insatiate flame. Then she drew her horn from her side, and sounding it loud and shrill from Heremon cliff, heard it answered from mountain to mountain, by all her armed confederates. The waves of the foaming billows now reflected a blood-red light from the scorching flames.....

Three hundred and sixty feet was the cliff perpendicular from the vast fathomless ocean. “Glenarvon, hurrah! Peace to the broken hearts! Nay, start not, Clarence: to horse, to horse! Thus charge: it is for life and honor.” The affrighted steed saw not the fearful chasm into which, goaded on by his rider, he involuntarily plunged. But de Ruthven heard the

piercing shriek he gave, as he sunk headlong into the rushing waters, which in a moment overwhelming both horse and rider, concealed them from the view of man. (344)

Just as the immeasurable ocean absorbs and overwhelms the precise measurement of the cliff's height, so does the green mantle and covering wave envelop and dissolve the precise vision of Elinor St Clare, returning contingency and opacity to the future. Elinor's final charge is thus a charge against her own foresight. Her suicide is far from solipsistic and is rather an act of renunciation that would annihilate the 'privilege' of prediction in the name of an Exodus not from Ireland *per se* but from the sad fate of the Rebellion according to the historical record.<sup>163</sup> Elinor would open the future by blinding Clarence's—that is, again, clarity's—view of the cliff and her own view of the inevitable. Desperately, Elinor seeks to reintroduce hope, something not-yet-conscious, into the historical trajectory that would—for her, eventually, and for readers of the novel, already—form history as we know it, namely, the Rebellion's failure. In other words, reintroducing hope here takes the negative form of removing the hopelessness disclosed by her Cassandrian vision of the 'future' of Irish history.

In fact, *Glenarvon* seems constantly in a state of Rebellion against Glenarvon's insistence on history's inevitability: "Calantha, the time for safety is past: it is too late now. I have linked my soul to yours; I love you in defiance of myself; I know it to be guilt, and to be death; but it must be. We follow but the dark destiny that involves us: we cannot escape from fate" (213). As noted above, another way that the text registers its protest to this kind of coercion is in its willingness to translate details from Lamb's relationship with Byron into the plot of the novel through a particularly audacious pun on the "double hair" incident. Given the apparent inheritability of prophecy, the concept of inheritance is, in *Glenarvon*, coloured by notions of repetition, fate, and inevitability. Hence, it is significant that Lamb not only runs parallel plots within *Glenarvon* but also opens the text to two different layers of historical context: public and private. Byron's private double hair joke seems to fracture the closed, restricted economy of inheritance in

---

<sup>163</sup> As noted briefly above, critics point out that the name "Calantha" alludes to the protagonist in John Ford's 1633 *The Broken Heart*. Here, Elinor's "peace to the broken hearts" seems once again to gesture in this direction by echoing the title itself. In fact, if stoicism is one important theme in Ford's text, Elinor—more than Calantha—may reflect that theme in her self-sacrifice.

*Glenarvon* by offering itself as a potential origin for Lamb's concern with inheritance. The pun on "hair" not only opens the possibility of displacing the determinism of the inherited curse in the novel but, further, opens the text up to very different casual networks in terms of its own relationship, as a cultural production, to social, political, and personal context. Like Elinor, who aims to reintroduce the opacity of Romantic prophecy into a history that has become tyrannically determined and determining, the pun on "hair" counteracts the notion of historical predictability contained in the novel's treatment of inheritance and counteracts the notion that historical context can be reduced to one single, determining cause. The pun, in other words, is Lamb's take on the double voice of prophecy: a voice that announces and renounces, threatens and declaims, and is always already a repetition of the immediacy of the Absolute, undermining at the root claims to historical univocity.

The introduction of Lamb's personal history thus interrupts the narrative of official Irish history in *Glenarvon*. This intervention is elaborated into a larger pattern of images and concepts that serve to counterpoint and relativize the narrative of failed Rebellion to which the novel is, as noted above, ambivalently joined. Given the context of the Byron-Lamb affair, it is not surprising that Lamb should, for instance, make idolatry a recurring motif in *Glenarvon*, for it captures something both of Byron's unprecedented popularity and the vanity of the audience that affords him attention. The text, however, suggests a more complex set of issues surrounding this concept, such that slighting Byron becomes a relatively small part of a larger concern with cultural and historical representation. Put differently, the motif of idolatry serves as a commentary on the relationship between history and aesthetics when that relationship is thrown into crisis insofar as Lamb introduces a *second* set of historical circumstances 'behind' her aesthetic production. The text's historical overdetermination—its multiple 'grounding' causes—thus diminishes its determination by one history or another exclusively, resulting in a production that can only reflect 'history' (in scare-quotes since it has lost, in its very materiality, any claim to univocity) in a complex and conflicted way. For this idolatry must be understood not to be a failure in representation; rather, in the absence of a stable meta-history, representation is necessarily 'idolatrous' as long as it maintains its nostalgia for an economy of representation that has become untenable.



Lamb intensifies this ambivalence between history and representation throughout *Glenarvon* by thematizing idolatry. Before his ‘murder,’ Albert, the Duke’s heir, is repeatedly praised as an “idol” (19), as the “constant object of still encreasing idolatry” (9); Lord Avondale, Calantha’s long-suffering husband, the narrator relates, “could only idolize” (50) his new wife—an equivocal compliment at the best of times but especially so in the second edition of *Glenarvon*, as Lamb abruptly makes the Delevals Catholics; and Count Gondimar, addressing Viviani (Glenarvon), remarks, “life is just opening upon you; Calantha is your idol” (84). This somewhat ameliorative sense of the term finds its counterpoint, however, in Avondale’s later, more cynical exchange with Calantha: “Whilst [men] believe [women] angels, we kneel to you, we are your slaves;—[but after marriage,] we awake and find you women, and expect obedience:—and is it not what you were made for?”—‘Henry, [replied Calantha] we are made your idols too—too long, to hear this sad reverse’” (95). This picture of domesticity as a failed form of Keatsian imagination, of Adam’s domestic dream—“he awoke and found it truth” (36)—suggests a more dysfunctional form of representation, where the idol proves false and disappointingly mundane. Yet, this does not prevent nearly everyone in the text from idolizing Glenarvon: “all others, like herself [thought Calantha], were enamoured of the same idol [i.e., Glenarvon]” (158). Even Glenarvon himself, taking advantage of his double identity to reflect on Viviani, his alter-ego, announces and seems cynically to enjoy his idolism:

“Who is this Viviani?” he [i.e., the Duke of Altemonte] said, in a tone of voice loud and terrible. “An idol,” replied Glenarvon, “whom the multitude have set up for themselves, and worshipped, forsaking their true faith, to follow after a false light—a man who is in love with crime and baseness—one, of whom it has been said, that he hath an imagination of fire playing around a heart of ice—one whom the never-dying worm feeds on by night and day—a hypocrite,” continued Glenarvon, with a smile of bitterness, “who wears a mask to his friends, and defeats his enemies by his unexpected sincerity.” (323)

Like Byronic mobility, this final line effectively deconstructs the expected distinction between sincerity and deception, gesturing toward the redefinition of idolatry: for idolatry

can connote falsity only relatively within the world of composite and shifting identities that Lamb's pun opens, with its gesture away from biological determinism and toward a social milieu where identity is particularly malleable—where one (clipping of) hair/heir can be replaced by another.

Traditionally, the idol is distinguished from the icon. While the icon opens a conduit between the human and the Divine, the idol, in contrast, diverts or misappropriates that relation. As Jean-Luc Marion, puts it, “what the idol works to reabsorb is, precisely, the distance and the withdrawal of the divine. [...]. Subsidizing the absence of the divine, the idol makes the divine available, secures it, [but] in the end distorts it” (7). If Lamb, however, introduces the concept of idolatry, she rejects this metaphysics. For Marion's distinction posits a transcendent essence whose inaccessibility perpetually indebts finite humanity and relegates all representation to misrepresentation. In contrast, Lamb seems to anticipate Jean-Luc Nancy's analysis of idolatry:

What is condemned [with charges of idolatry], therefore, is not that which is an “image of” but rather that which asserts its presence only through itself, a pure presence in a certain sense, a massive presence that amounts to its being-there: the idol does not move, does not see, does not speak, “yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer”—and the idolater, facing the idol, also does not see and does not understand. Quite the opposite of the idol, the “real god” is, in short, only word (addressed to his people), vision (of the heart of man), and movement (in order to accompany his people).

Thus the idol is not condemned as imitation or copy, but rather in terms of its full and heavy presence, a presence of or within an immanence where nothing opens (eye, ear, or mouth) and from which nothing departs or withdraws (thought or word at the back of a throat or in the depths of a gaze). (*Ground* 30-31)

Nancy describes a kind of idol where it is not a discrepancy between appearance and essence that generates the sense impropriety. Rather, the idol induces anxiety precisely because, in this formulation, it *denies* the retreat of some kind of hyper-essence—God, Reality, or the thing-in-itself. Lamb adopts the terms of idolatry but only, it seems,

dramatically to explode the metaphysics implied by the attendant concept of representation. In affirming a certain kind of idolism, Lamb aims to reconfigure the logic of presentation and representation in historical terms as a conflict not between more or less accurate representations (with the whole range of problems surrounding dissimulation) but as a field of competing presentations as mere simulations.

Lamb's concept of idolatry thus hints at the more Althusserian notion of historical representation, one where events emerge from an "absent cause" (Jameson 35)—that is, the cause exists but is not available except in its effects. As noted above, Althusser's concept of structural causation—an attempt to avoid providential schemes of historiography from Hegel to Marx—re-conceives cause as the synchrony of productive relations within an historical moment. Cause, then, is understood as the synchronic form of this system.<sup>164</sup> Lamb thinks of history in this manner, abandoning totalizing narratives by casting her idols in a Nietzschean twilight. Indeed, just as Althusser will critique the classic Marxist notion of economic determination "in the last instance"<sup>165</sup> in favor of a model of "semi-autonomous levels, each possessing its own structural and internal necessity and constituting a kind of metonymy," so does Lamb reject the notion that historical cause can be attributed to a single level of the "detotalized totality" of the social and political world (Lentricchia 122). From this perspective, the "double hair" incident with Byron is not necessarily the efficient cause of Lamb's plot. Rather, more troublingly, it opens the possibility of a much wider and perhaps immeasurable nexus of influences, of a material context that does not stabilize the relationship between history and romance but rather reveals materiality itself to be heterogeneous or, as in Shelley's *Hellas*, in a process of active (re)formation—of revolution. As in Shelley's play, Lamb's text does not merely thematize revolution but adopts a revolutionary form or style of composition and actively performs rather than merely describes Rebellion.

This theme of idolatry in *Glenarvon* gestures toward the role of the "relic" in the formal construction of *Glenarvon*: for the pun on "hair" recalls a very odd circulation of actual hair between Byron and Lamb and, moreover, suggests that a history of this kind of fetish object might have its own genre. The word "relic," as the Oxford English

<sup>164</sup> "For Althusser a structure functions synchronically as the 'system of social relationships as a whole,' in Jameson's words" (Lentricchia 122).

<sup>165</sup> For Althusser's critique, see *For Marx*, pages 111-114.

Dictionary notes, comes from the Latin for “remains” and often refers, very literally, to the corpse of the deceased. This is particularly relevant to *Glenarvon*: for it is not only that Lamb includes Byron’s ‘hand’ in her text when she splices his correspondence with her into the novel. She also includes the hotly contested trinkets they exchanged.

Calantha, for instance, sports a “chain and locket, which contained [Glenarvon’s] dark hair” (187),<sup>166</sup> as if to complete fictionally the exchange botched in reality. Similarly, when Glenarvon presents Calantha a ring—“remember the ring; this, too, is a marriage bond between us” (256)—Lamb presents fictionally an exchange of rings that occurred actually but that Byron attempted to deny. Indeed, if Lamb, early in 1813, successfully forged Byron’s signature to gain his miniature from John Murray, the form of *Glenarvon* takes this ventriloquism further, as the eponymous villain is really a ‘miniature Byron’—though one, Byron complains, he “did not sit long enough” for (*Letters* 330).

Hence, *Glenarvon* is not only concerned, thematically, with idolatry but is constructed, formally, as a reliquary of historical fragments, a kind of museum for what Clara Tuite describes as “the material remains and canonical relics of one of the most celebrated but also banal love stories of literary Romanticism” (60). The scandal of the text is thus not merely the breach in social decorum that grants the public access to Byron’s private correspondence. Rather, the indiscretion centers on granting public access to Byron’s corpse. For Lamb, in every sense, *mortifies* Byron, then places his remains on display, reveling in the darker side of what Samantha Matthews describes as a “culture of material and immaterial commemoration” fueled by “a heightened awareness of the significant relationship between the materiality of death and the materiality of books” (11). With this strategy, Lamb proves prescient: by aligning Byron’s celebrity with the mortuary, she anticipates the public’s morbid fascination, following Byron’s death, with his body—as if popularity amounts to a living death, or as if death and celebrity are basically continuous states of being.

Relics form the tissue of Lamb’s private history and help stitch together *Glenarvon*’s plot. These relics constitute the failed materialization of idols, abortive attempts at incarnation that, ultimately, can only make a spectacle of their failure to

---

<sup>166</sup> Lamb emphasizes this element by repeating it later in the text: “As he [Glenarvon] spoke, he placed around her [Calantha’s] neck a chain of gold, with a locket of diamonds, containing his hair” (256).

stabilize representation. Hence, while Lamb, in one sense, writes a *roman à clef*, in another sense she most decidedly does *not*. For the *roman à clef* genre is essentially allegorical, the hypotext or the key determining the surface text such that the story remains a partial, derivative expression of a transcendent code. That is, the *roman à clef* represents a form of narrative akin to predictive and restrictive prophecy. However, the duplicity of historical material in *Glenarvon*—drawing as it does on public and private history in an irreducibly ambivalent way—displaces this logic, linking history, like the mobile Byronic subject, into a wider complex of relations that levels-out historical material into an array of relics. In other words, St Clare’s prophetic self-annihilation dramatizes the negation of historical determination just as the text performs a similar displacement of historical determination at the level of its historical and narrative materiality. Put differently, what Althusser calls an “absent cause”—the impossibility of isolating or identifying cause except retroactively and, therefore, as something of a fiction—could just as easily refer to an *excess* of cause, an abundance of hypotexts or multiple keys, where it becomes impossible to reduce history’s figures to effects of a single, overriding determination.

And indeed this is the case with *Glenarvon*. As Paul Douglass notes, characters in Lamb’s text are not simply representatives of real individuals but composite formations.<sup>167</sup> For instance, Glenarvon is Viviani, and he is also Byron. But he is not only Byron: as leader of the United Irishmen, Glenarvon is, as noted above, Wolf Tone, the co-called “prophet of Irish independence” (Elliott 1). Moreover, Glenarvon’s turn against the rebels upon recovering his ancient titles re-casts him as the Prince Regent who, upon inheriting the crown, turns against the Whig society he earlier patronized. In other words, if Lamb formally and thematically invests her text in history, she also re-imagines the relationship between narrative and history. She does so by re-conceiving history’s materiality: on one hand, the determinism of the official history of the Irish Rebellion is met with a prophetic negativity that aims to cancel its own predictive power; on the other hand, Lamb’s personal history—which as a whole suspends the novel’s commitment to the history of Rebellion—abdicates any claim to transcendent authority by treating its

---

<sup>167</sup> “Some readers of *Glenarvon* could be dispassionate in assigning ‘originals’ to its characters. Robert Wilmot was an acquaintance of Lady Byron’s, and he wrote to her with his own key to the novel, most of whose characters he perceptively described as ‘compounds’ rather than ‘portraits’” (Douglass xxxv).

own materials as fragmentary relics of identities that are not themselves simply the daughters of memory.

### III. "If we can fit but one link to another": Binding Prophecy in Shelley's *Valperga*

Early in Mary Shelley's historical romance, *Valperga: Or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, Castruccio Castracani dei Antelminelli, at just fourteen years of age, journeys from Ancona—his family's refuge following exile from Lucca at the hands of the Guelphs—to Florence, lured by an advertisement for a dramatic rendering of Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>168</sup> Beginning a cautionary motif that will traverse the novel and code imagination as excessive, dangerous, and prone to self-destruction—indeed, will align such imagination with prophecy—this performance not only “fired the imagination of Castruccio” (65) but gained its intense effect through its externalization of the collective interior: “the infernal drama was acted to the life; and the terrible effect of such a scene was enhanced, by the circumstance of its being no more than an actual representation of what then existed in the imagination of the spectators, endued with the vivid colours of a faith inconceivable in these lethargic days” (66). In what Castruccio cannot help but feel as a kind of Divine punishment, the scene suddenly transforms from an imaginary into a real Hell: a substitution that will be repeated later in the text when Beatrice, the prophetess of Ferrara, led by her vivid, recurring dream of a deluge, falls into the hands and the subterranean prison of the sadistic Tripalda in a literal rendering of the depths of her own unconscious.<sup>169</sup> For, while Castruccio looks on helplessly, “the

<sup>168</sup> “It had been proclaimed in the streets of the city, by a herald sent by the inhabitants of the quarter of San Frediano, that all who wished to have news from the other world, should repair on the first of May to the bridge of Carraia or to the quay of the Arno. And he added, that he believed that preparations were made to exhibit Hell, such as it had been described in a poem now writing by Dante Alighieri, a part of which had been read, and had given rise to this undertaking.” (65)

<sup>169</sup> In her meeting with Mandragola, Beatrice reveals important details of her prophetic dream of abduction that she neglected or was unable to recall in her description of this same dream—one she dreams “always on the eve of some great misfortune” (358)—to Euthanasia. These additional details suggest a psychological *katabasis*, placing her not only in the company of Virgil and Dante but also of Freud. Beyond the image of the deserted castle islanded in a flooded plain that, earlier, terminated her memory of the dream, she here recalls a scene of shadowy doubling that is really self-reflection, suggesting that the dungeon she will literally inhabit in some way represents the caverns of her psyche:

There was a vast, black house standing in the midst of the water; a concourse of dark shapes hovered about me; and suddenly I was transported into a boat which was to convey me to that mansion. Strange! another boat like to mine moved beside us; its prow was carved in the same

bridge of Carraia, on which a countless multitude stood, one above the other, looking on the river, fell” (66). Fleeing the “fearful screams” (66) of the victims and onlookers, Castruccio, in what seems like penance for surrendering to his imagination, enters a local church to compose himself and to thank God that he had “escaped from Hell!” (67).

In other words, Castruccio fares much better than his fellow Ghibelline, Farinata degli Uberti, whom Dante torments in Canto Ten of *Inferno*. The history of Farinata—one that looms large in the political and military conflicts Castruccio enters so ambitiously—is particularly germane since it is through Dante’s treatment of him that *Valperga* marries prophecy with relentless persecution. As Allen Mandelbaum notes, Farinata was the name used for Manente, son of Jacopo degli Uberti, a famous leader of the Ghibellines of Florence. At the meeting of the victorious Ghibellines at Empoli after the battle of Montaperti in September 1260, he vehemently opposed the proposal to destroy Florence. He returned to Florence after Montaperti and died in 1264, one year before Dante’s birth. In 1283, [two years after the birth of Castruccio, according

---

manner; its rowers, the same in number, the same in habiliment, struck the water with their oars at the same time with ours; a woman sate near the stern, aghast and wild as I;—but their boat cut the waves without a sound, their oars splashed not the waters as they struck them, and, thought the boats were alike black, yet not like mine did this other cast a black shadow on the water. We landed together; I could not walk for fear; I was carried into a large room, and left alone; I leaned against the hangings, and there advanced to meet me another form. It was myself; I knew it; it stood before me, melancholy and silent; the very air about it was still. I can tell no more;—a few minutes ago I remembered none of this; a few moments, and I distinctly remembered the words it spoke; they have now faded. Yes; there is something mysterious in my nature, which I cannot fathom. (379-80)

Like the “dark chariot” (2.4.143) of the Spirit of the Hours in Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, the second boat is something like Beatrice’s “shadow of [...] destiny” (2.4.146), one that will indeed “wrap in lasting night heaven’s kingless throne” (2.4.148) though in Beatrice’s case this means not psychological revolution but rather confirms the psychic intrusion and ascendancy of an Evil principle. In terms of its connection with Percy Shelley’s work, however, the notion of encountering one’s dream in a real scene and falling unconscious seems to come from the final passage of *Speculations on Metaphysics* where Percy describes a different scene but the very same psychological situation, going so far as to break his text off mid-sentence: “here I was obliged to leave off, overcome by thrilling horror” (7.67), he notes. In her note to this passage, Mary Shelley remarks, “I remember well his [i.e., Percy] coming to me from writing it, pale and agitated, to seek refuge in conversation from the fearful emotions it excited. His nervous temperament was wound up by the delicacy of his health to an intense degree of sensibility, and while his active mind pondered for ever upon, and drew conclusions from his sensations, his reveries increased their vivacity, till they mingled with, and made one with thought, and both became absorbing and tumultuous, even to physical pain” (7.67). Mary thus seems to model Beatrice at least in part on Percy, which will have interesting implications given Beatrice’s invective *against* imagination later in the novel.

to Tegrimi<sup>170</sup>] Farinata and his wife were posthumously excommunicated by the Franciscan inquisitor; their bones were exhumed and dispersed, and the earthly goods of their heirs confiscated. (360)

Farinata's heresy—echoing the Paterin heresy adopted by Beatrice later in *Valperga*—consists in a rejection of Christian metaphysics, for Dante locates him with “Epicurus and all his followers,/ Who hold the soul dies with the body” (10.13-14). What is most important in the context of *Valperga*, however, is not so much the behaviour of Farinata, although he prefigures and markedly contrasts Castruccio's own—for Castruccio *will* demolish the castle of Valperga, Florence's proxy in the plain of Lucca. Rather, it is the specific nature of his torment. Since “the punishments in the *Inferno* follow the law of *contrapasso*—that is, the punishment is commensurate with the fault” (Mandelbaum 350), there is a darkly comic irony that Farinata should be transformed into a Cassandrian prophet.

After some confusing, initial exchanges with Farinata's shade, Dante asks, “pray untie for me this knot [...] Which has entangled and confused my judgement” (10.95-6) and remarks:

From what I hear, it seems  
You see beforehand that which time will bring,  
But cannot know what happens in the present. (10.97-99)

To which Farinata responds,

We see, like those with faulty vision,  
Things at a distance [...]. That much,  
For us, the mighty Ruler's light still shines.  
When they draw near or happen now,  
Our minds are useless. Without the words of others  
We can know nothing of your human state.  
Thus it follows that all our knowledge  
Will perish at the very moment  
The portals of the future close. (10.100-8)

---

<sup>170</sup> See Rajan's chronology in *Valperga* (47). Mary Shelley makes Castruccio younger than he might actually have been, imagining his birth to be in 1289.



If Epicurus' atomism<sup>171</sup> promotes living for the present moment since it denies the immortality of the soul, it is fitting, according to Dante's form of poetic retribution, that a particularly disabling version of prophecy should become Farinata's peculiar form of bondage: his view of the present is obscured and, in its place, only the long, self-alienating view of the future remains. As with Camioli and Elinor St Clare in *Glenarvon*, prophecy is here coded not as an enviable privilege but as a form of punishment, one that actually inhibits the subject despite its sense of expanded consciousness. In *Valperga* prophecy, as prediction and predetermination, will follow this Danteian formulation rigorously: foresight comes at the expense of freedom and historical agency in the present. That is, prophecy is presented as a form of limitation, something captured neatly in Euthanasia's resident prophet, Bindo, whose name suggests all forms of binding and bondage.<sup>172</sup> The power to see the universal scheme in advance solicits a kind of Divine supervision that would aim to keep imagination within the limits of the actual and forestall counterfactual and utopian thought that might reveal that the actual is only provisional. As a reflection of its setting, the text seems to defend Dante's world-view. For such a view would be quite comfortable with the notion of Divine providence. In many respects Shelley's setting, if Dante's vision can serve as a window on the period as a whole, is pre-historical: this concept of history is thoroughly bound up with patterns based on Divine justice, thus containing and disciplining historical unfolding through a metaphysics of transcendent, eternal laws. There would be something natural or

---

<sup>171</sup> The Atomists, like Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and later Lucretius, following the lead of Empedocles, offer a pluralist solution to the problem of change and becoming, suggesting that while the root elements of existence are eternal their relation is finite and that these elements can combine and recombine in order to produce change. The Atomists thus attempt to overcome the Parmenidian *aporia* by offering a theory of change and movement that avoids the absurd consequences of not only *ex nihilo* creation but also of being's supposed annihilation in every moment of change. In this metaphysics, the soul is no more or less stable than any other thing, although some Atomists would suggest that it is composed of the most subtle or smoothest atoms.

<sup>172</sup> "He [i.e., Bindo] has by heart, ready to quote on any suitable occasion, every prophecy that has been made since the time of Adam, and knows all the vulgar expositions of the sacred texts. Then he is an adept in the knowledge of sacred trees, fountains, and stones, the flight of birds, lucky and unlucky days; he has an extensive acquaintance with witches, astrologers, sorcerers and *tempestarii*; he knows every peculiar ceremony for remarkable days, how to celebrate the calends of January, those of August, and the *Vindemie Nolane*; none of our cattle are blessed by St. Anthony until he has bound on their crowns; the ceremonies attendant on the Nativity, Easter, and the other feasts, all are conducted under his guidance. He interprets all the dreams of the castle, and foretells the point of time when to begin any enterprise [cf. Beatrice]: he has a wonderful assortment of holly legends and strange relics; such as a lock of Adam's hair, a little sawdust from Noah's saw pit [...]" (171).

commonsensical in Castruccio and Dante's historical moment about the notion of predestination. Punishing any Pro-metheian effort—any forward dreaming or revolutionary impulse—to intervene in this logic or discourse thus amounts to the expression of an ideological pressure to defend the sense of a transcendental plan in human life, nature, and thinking: to defend the continuity of a world “folded in upon itself” (Foucault 17) against the more troubling forms of negativity, like unconsciousness and temporality, coincident with of the rise of dialectical historical thought.

The language of futurity in *Valperga* is, for instance, frequently couched in the language of fate or destiny, suggesting that while the future is unknown it is nevertheless basically continuous with the present and past. Hence, the youthful Castruccio “dreamed of futurity”; and yet, “the uncertainty of his destiny only gave more scope to his imagination, as he figured the glorious part which he flattered himself he was about to act on the great theatre” (83). While Castruccio does not know his future, it is nevertheless framed as his “destiny.” Indeed, the theatre metaphor suggests that his part or role precedes him and that he will perform his life according to some sort of script. This language thus quickly circumscribes the claims to his imagination's expansion. It is clear that his imagination's range remains limited to the predictable patterns and subject positions Castruccio's historical moment affords to one of his particular class, gender, and political constitution. Later, even Castruccio's ostensible scepticism concerning superstition belies his investment in a very conservative concept of history, one that claims the impossibility of prediction only because it is so sure that history is mere repetition—that is, completely predictable in its broader and deeper structure: “I am little acquainted with the history of antient [*sic*] times,’ said Castruccio gaily; ‘but, since the world began, I can easily imagine that states have risen and fallen; we are blind with regard to futurity, and methinks it is foolish to build for a longer term than a man's life” (114-115). Castruccio's Viconian sense of fatality here—the inevitable fall and rise, rise and fall, of power—countermands even as it seems to endorse the sort of contingency (the swerve or *clinamen*) the Atomists and perhaps Farinata degli Uberti posited; in other words, if Castruccio seems in this comment to become an Epicurean advocate for the finitude of the soul and of modulating behaviour according the short-term scale of the individual's life, he nevertheless thinks that very contingency into a circle of inevitability,

or mitigates the process of organic development (opened by a recognition of contingency) by determining that process at a higher level in terms of a predictable narrative. In an historical version of Atomistic pluralism, Castruccio suggests that while the particular content of historical events remains unknowable and therefore contingent, the larger relations of history follows an, at root, Aristotelian concept of “revolution”—that is, revolution in the sense of a circuit that returns to its original place, thus forestalling historical narratives of development in a Manichean antinomy. This is something akin to the popular Medieval sense of history as a perpetual struggle between reason and irrationality and to the aforementioned *De casibus* tradition where Fortune functions as a kind of karma police that equalizes good and bad luck.

In fact, since Shelley ensures that “there is never any doubt about Castruccio’s development, which is already written in history” (Rajan 34), his vocal repudiation of prediction cannot help but become ironic, gesturing toward a more ambiguous relationship between history and romance. Upon hearing that the Florentines keep “a number of lions, as signs and symbols of their strength” since they believe that “God and St. John have plainly manifested on many occasions” through these animals, Castruccio is all derision: “So these wise republicans, whom you, dear Euthanasia, so much vaunt, believe these childish omens. I would wager my best charger, that their records are full of the influence of stars, and the appearance of comets!” (193). Euthanasia, in reply, tempers Castruccio’s scepticism—in fact, hints at his subtle hypocrisy—pointing out the *universal* impulse to bind cause to effect:

We love to find a cause for every event, believing that, if we can but fit one link to another, we are on the high road for discovering the last secrets of nature. You smile at the celebration of the birth of these lion’s whelps, yet I own that it pleases me; how innocent, yet how active, the imagination of that people be, who can find a cause for universal joy in such an event!

It is this same imagination more usefully and capaciously employed, that makes them decree the building of the most extensive and beautiful building of modern times. The men who have conceived the idea, and contributed their money towards the erection of the Duomo, will never see

its completion; but their posterity will, and, if they be not degenerate, will glory in the noble spirit of their ancestors. (194)

Euthanasia's example of architecture's capacity to project into the future—literally, to structure social space for future generations—not only recalls Farinata's efforts to save Florence from destruction but points toward the logic of apocalypse. The imagination's relationship to the future is curtailed through an emphasis on spatialization and mapping that imply a completion of vision; prophecy is very literally spatialized and de-temporalized here as the future is concretely formed in terms of a precisely determined plan or model.<sup>173</sup>

What becomes particularly strange in *Valperga* is, then, neither that prophecy should be aligned with prediction nor that predictions should prove accurate or true, nor that the future should be entailed to the past in various ways. Rather, it is far more surprising how often accurate prediction is cast as failed prediction, or how often the text attempts to diminish prophecy's authority through the ostensible exposure of deception or trickery. For, while scepticism toward prophetic claims of foreknowledge may feel natural to the modern or nineteenth-century reader, it grinds against the sense of order and universality appropriate to a Medieval setting. Shelley, in other words, seems to contaminate the thirteenth-century world with a more Romantic sense of temporality, precisely to the extent that she exposes prediction as a combination of fancy and manipulation. It is, in other words, in the ostensible pronouncement of prediction and

---

<sup>173</sup> For Steven Goldsmith, apocalypse tends to substitute history, in all its plasticity and contingency, for spatial, monumental schemas that look very much like blueprints. Hence, commenting on the title of his book, Goldsmith explains that "'Unbuilding Jerusalem' is meant to indicate some types of resistance to formal apocalypse within romantic literature" (23). In other words, Goldsmith illustrates—through works like Joseph Mede's 1643 *The Key of Revelation*—that there is more than a metaphorical association between apocalypse and detemporalization by looking at the tendency in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century apocalyptic texts to express themselves diagrammatically and visually.

As an aside, this might offer a theoretical angle for a reconsideration of the visual aspect of Blake's work. For Blake would seem to participate ambivalently in this kind of visual apocalypse. While some of his images—such as "The Last Judgment" or his engravings inspired by the *Book of Ezekiel* and the Apocalypse—do seem sublimely totalized, other images—such as those that accompany *Urizen*—seem to dissolve totality. In fact, in many cases, there is a rather inexplicable relationship between text and image, such as in the leading plates of *Europe*. Moreover, Blake's page, as a blend of visual art and text, tends to displace the symmetry and systematic layout of typical apocalyptic visual models. In fact, in many cases text and image interpenetrate such that it becomes impossible strictly to identify the visual with the spatial and the narrative with temporality, as Goldsmith attempts to do. At any rate, it may still be useful to consider how the visual and the apocalyptic relate in earlier apocalyptic writing in order to consider the ways Blake participates and reformulates that tradition.

imagination's closure—in the ostensible obliteration of the future's indefiniteness—that a different, more Romantic and opaque sense of the future as indeterminacy opens.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the text's contradiction of the determinism of its prevailing discourse is its ambivalent treatment of prediction in the Judgement of God episode in Ferrara. For the text's ambiguity allows one, in fact, to read Beatrice's successful negotiation of the test as indeed a proof of Divine intervention, even as her guardian, the Bishop of Ferrara, confesses to Castruccio to rigging the Inquisition's test. As the Bishop narrates to Castruccio,

Beatrice herself is wrapt up in the belief of her own exalted nature, and really thinks herself the *Ancilla Dei*, the chosen vessel into which God has poured a portion of his spirit: she preaches, she prophesies, she sings extempore hymns, and entirely fulfilling the part of *Donna Estatica*, she passes many hours of each day in solitary meditation, or rather in dreams, to which her active imagination gives a reality and life which confirm her in her mistakes. (212)

Her behaviour leads to her sudden incarceration at the hands of Dominican inquisitors whereupon she proposes a test, a Judgement of God, to prove her status as a chosen prophet. Unbeknownst to Beatrice, the Bishop, however, arranges to fix this test—she must navigate, blindfolded, a maze of white-hot ploughshares—by appealing to the Abbot whose men are charged with staging the event. The Abbot agrees and when Beatrice does indeed manage to emerge unscathed, forcing the inquisitors to retreat, the Bishop suffers from a guilty conscience given the perpetuation of what, in his mind, is a total fraud. And yet, the strangeness of the scene emerges only upon closer scrutiny. For what one first notices is that it seems impossible, despite the Bishop's claims—and despite the modern reader's own willingness quickly to accept his demystification of the scene—to determine how exactly this test was faked. There is no narrative explanation of how precisely the brothers of the church are able to ensure Beatrice's safety or success, especially since she is not aware of any mundane interventions and does not herself knowingly participate in any hoax. Indeed, when the Bishop undertakes the scheme, he is entreated by the Abbot “not to ask an explanation”: the Abbot assures the Bishop “that he and his monks [have] the charge of the preparation for the Judgement and that [...] she

[i.e., Beatrice] should receive no injury” (216). Later on, after her escape from Tripalda and rescue by Euthanasia from the inquisitors of Lucca, Beatrice’s own narrative of events does little to elucidate the matter. She recalls addressing the Bishop: “tell me then, by your hopes of heaven, [...] whether fraud was used in the *Judgement of God* that I underwent, or how I escaped the fearful burning of the hot shares” (353). When he delays his explanation, she insists that he “tell [her] truly how it happened” (353). “That I cannot, my child” replies the Bishop, “for I was myself kept in the dark” (353). Oddly, this crucial episode of putative enlightenment seems, under closer examination, to become more and more mysterious and inexplicable.

What this prompts, then, is the recognition of competing truth claims, and a consideration of the *function* of the Bishop’s denial of Beatrice’s prophetic powers. After all, the evidence available to the reader suggests that Beatrice *is* inspired. Moreover, in terms of the text’s historical context and genre as historical romance, it would in some respects be more fitting for Beatrice to emerge truly vindicated. For this would fit the Dantean sense of the universe as a just and rational order thus subject—at least potentially, given its metaphysical structure—to prediction by special insight. It seems, rather, that the Bishop’s ironically incredible attempt to discredit Beatrice serves as a kind of emergency amputation, that it represents an attempt to preserve a larger sense of universal harmony by totally eliminating a portion of that whole that, while ostensibly an agent of harmonization, is in fact a sign of imminent and immanent disharmony. The Bishop’s *scepticism* surrounding prophetic prediction aims, counter-intuitively, to *reinforce* the larger law of Providence. He rejects Beatrice as the point through which Providence becomes revealed in history only because he is in fact invested in saving history from a sense of contingency that such an acknowledgement would, necessarily and symptomatically, imply. For the determinacy of this revelation in the individuality of Beatrice could be deemed a threat to the distance the transcendent plan must maintain in order to remain, precisely, transcendent.

By resisting and seeking to eliminate prophecy, the Bishop seeks to reinforce God’s exclusive control over the interconnectedness of existence and to suppress any sense that this control is in doubt. For the arrival of the prophet, as a supplement to continuity, betrays the anxiety she is supposed to repress. Prophets, as representatives of

the discourse of history more broadly, seem to emerge precisely as a response to an unacknowledged but growing sense of discord and senselessness, such that the emergence of supplementary forms of organization cannot help but also intensify the anxiety they are solicited to ameliorate. Hence, the denial of Beatrice's predictive power aims not to introduce a more radical, Romantic, detotalizing form of prophecy or contingency; the aim, rather, is to remove the supplement of prophecy altogether in order to forestall the implicit allusion to discontinuity. Or, in Freudian terms, this is the gesture of denegation: translating the German *Verneinung*, "denegation" means, according to Mark Taylor, "an affirmation that is a negation and a negation that is an affirmation" (in Foshay 7). Denegation is not merely a denial but also a kind of affirmation of the denial—a negation that aims to intensify its negation but threatens to turn itself into a new positivity. It is in this latter sense that the term connects to the rhetorical meaning of apophasis, "a kind of an Irony, whereby we deny that we say or do that which we especially say or do" (OED 1). Denegation indicates an ambivalent negation that ends up exposing its own repressive action in the effort to intensify that repression. Indeed, in the case of *Valperga*, by making a spectacle of masking the symptom—of eliding that which is already a displacement, a second-order attempt to absorb the figure intended to absorb anxiety—Shelley allows a more troubling sense of temporality as contingency to enter the text or, in the language of Galeazzo, allows "the plague of liberty" (198) to infect this closed world. Like St. Clare in *Glenarvon*, Beatrice's apocalyptic vision has the counter-effect of returning the text to history as potentiality. Like *The Last Man*, the negation of total predictability seems to open up history through a double negation or negative dialectic.

Beatrice's escape from Tripalda represents prophecy's escape from total repression through ostensible demystification. That is, her escape represents the text's resistance to the sheer expulsion of the supplement of prophecy and the total denial of discontinuity—representative of immanent possibility—that always attends prophecy. This escape is not, however, the only factor that places the continuity or at least reciprocity of Medieval life under threat in *Valperga*. The text reveals a deep if oblique resistance to the predictability of the future in its attitude toward economics, specifically, usurious loans. The visceral disgust elicited, at several points in the text, by usury stands

behind the drama surrounding prophecy and prediction. That is, debt—accompanied by a usurious interest rate—represents a very concrete form of temporal and historical determinism. Such debts not only make a claim on the future (prophecy) but excessive interest rates (profit) prescribe even more precisely the shape of that future, as if meting out the possible into calculable units. Loans indebt the future of the debtor and radically circumscribe his or her relationship to self-determination. In this sense, Pepi can be read as a prophet whose effort to supplement and extend predictability and historical continuity is even more problematic than Beatrice's. In fact, Pepi fancies himself a kind of Mephistopheles and considers his paper contracts to be powerfully Faustian. Rather than merely extorting money, he insists that his insolvent debtors forfeit their very existence: "they are all mine," says Pepi, "body and soul; aye, with these bonds, the devil himself might buy them" (242). That is, Pepi frames his debts in consistently metaphysical terms that more closely align him with the concepts of fate and determinism. Just as prophetic predictions bear on human will, Pepi claims that his deceitful and unscrupulous dealings "blinded them [i.e., borrowers] till [he had] drawn their very souls from their bodies" (242).

Upon abandoning Beatrice in Ferrara, Castruccio visits Pepi in Cremona. Pepi claims he can ensure the success of a Ghibelline invasion, if led by Castruccio, and requests, in exchange for his help, to be made lord of the city following a successful revolt. Such ambition, in the abstract at least, is not unlike Castruccio's own. However, Castruccio is disgusted when Pepi reveals that his metaphorical "keys of this town" are in fact, in Castruccio's words, "usurious bonds" (239, 241). As the phrase makes clear, such debts imprison, bind, or enchain debtors, recalling both "Bindo"—whose name joins bondage with prophecy—and also Dante's Farinata who is literally and figuratively bound by prophecy itself. Indeed, Pepi conceals these bonds deep under his castle, in a "long gallery, windowless and damp, which by its closed air indicated that it was below the surface of the ground" and that Castruccio will describe as an "infernal den" (241, 243)—that is, in a Dantesque prison similar to Tripalda's wherein Beatrice suffers for three years. Yet like Tripalda's prison, where he attempts but fails to confine the supplement of prophecy, this effort fails. For Castruccio insists that a people increasingly intent on self-determination will not tolerate such contracts:



Thou, lord of Cremona! A usurer, a bloodsucker!—Why all the moisture squeezed from thy miserable carcass would not buy one drop of the noble heart's tide of your debtors.—And these parchments! Thinkest thou men are formed of straw to be bound with paper chains? Have they not arms? have they not swords? Tremble, foolish wretch! Be what thou art,—a sycophant.—No, thou art not human; but in these filthy vaults thou hast swollen, as a vile toad or rank mushroom; and then, because thou canst poison men, thou wouldst lord it over them! Now, thou base-minded fellow, be advised to cast off these presumptuous thoughts, or with my armed heel I will crush thee in the dust! (242)

Castruccio's prediction proves accurate. For while Castruccio himself merely threatens Pepi, the subsequent struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines in Cremona leads not only to Pepi's death but the utter destruction of his legacy:

Pepi fell in that tumult: whether by a chance-blow, or by the resolved dagger of one of his debtors, cannot be ascertained. But his dead body was discovered among the slain; and so great was the enmity of his townsmen against him, that, although Cane and his troops had already entered the city, the whole population rushed in fury towards his palace, and in a few hours the massy walls, the high tower, and all the boasted possessions of Pepi were, as himself, a loathsome and useless ruin. (246)

Ultimately, Pepi's bonds—his claims on the future—prove too frail and suffer their own ironic and reflexive entombment: “the hidden and unknown vaults where undisturbed; and the paper wealth of the usurer lay buried there, to rot in peace among the mildews and damps of those miserable dungeons” (246).

Since Pepi's contracts represent a form of predictive prophecy—another supplement to the prevailing discourse of determination and providence—his thorough vilification and utter destruction is comparable to the fate suffered by Beatrice. Yet, if this is another attempt to elide the symptom of historical supplementation in the effort to maintain the transcendence of Providence or to reserve determination for Divine forces only, this conservative gesture is so desperate that it cannot but suggest the weakening of Natural Law. That is, the general and violent rejection of Pepi's attempt to bind the future

cannot be completely accounted for in terms of policing or regulating determination; rather, it suggests a deeper and more troubling scepticism about historical and temporal continuity as such—or, at the very least, a sense that such determinism is at odds with a growing sense of individuality and personal sovereignty. In other words, the attempt to regulate and preserve history's regularity by punishing the attempts to appropriate transcendent offices invites a more troubling shape of historical consciousness to emerge. For the very appearance of the attempt to predict the future—even if in Beatrice's case demystified and Pepi's case vilified—suggests that continuity is in jeopardy and needs to be reinforced. Hence, the text's rejection of prophecy—Mandragola's callous and pointless manipulation of Bindo and Beatrice is another instance of this in *Valperga*—suggests, through the excessive energy with which it promotes demystification, that its ostensible historical continuity is premised on wilful avoidance of the more troubling implications of prophetic supplementation: namely, that the future may not be continuous with the past, that revolution may be more Romantic than Aristotelian, that historical negativity is not merely the privation of a rational scheme but that there may be a kind of alterity that fundamentally questions the metaphysical assumptions of Classical thought and their elaboration through the mechanics of the Enlightenment.

For a brief moment, Euthanasia gives voice to this changing sense of order—that is, she gives voice to the corrosive negativity of time. In a somewhat theatrical soliloquy, Euthanasia reflects on the uneven quality of temporal existence, where the uniformity of past, present, and future seems to be suspended by something ineffable in the lived instant:

The earth is a wide sea [...] and we its passing bubbles; it is a changeful heaven, and we its smallest and swiftest driven vapours; all changes, all passes—nothing is stable, nothing for one moment the same. But, if it be so, oh my God! if in Eternity all the years that man has numbered on this green earth be but a point, and we but the minutest speck in the great whole, why is the present moment every thing to us? Why do our minds, grasping all, feel as if eternity and immeasurable space were kernelled up in one instantaneous sensation? We look back to times past, and we mass them together, and say in such a year such and such events took place,

such wars occupied that year, and during the next there was peace. Yet each year was then divided into weeks, days, minutes, and slow-moving seconds, during which there were human minds to note and distinguish them, as now. We think of a small motion of the dial as of an eternity; yet ages have past, and they are but hours; the present moment will soon be only a memory, an unseen atom in the night of by-gone time. A hundred years hence, and young and old we shall all be gathered to the dust, and I shall no longer feel the coil that is at work in my heart, or any longer struggle within the inextricable bonds of fate. I know this; but yet this moment, this point of time, during which the sun makes but one round amidst the many millions it has made, and the many millions it will make, this moment is all to me. (305)

Here, just before the siege of Valperga, Euthanasia has a sublime vision of history that apprehends time's totality even as it senses the incommensurability of this totalization with the singularity of the lived moment. Like Blake's moment of prophetic self-annihilation in *Milton*, the finite minute here somehow contains the eternal, although not in a reductive manner. In fact, Euthanasia's vision of time's stratification recalls Blake's detailed description of how the "Sons of Los build Moments & Minutes & Hours/ And Days & Months & Years & Ages & Periods; wondrous buildings" (28.45-6) only, finally, to translate that expanding structure into "a pulsation of the artery" (28.49): a 'unit' that is, paradoxically, equal both to the ostensibly briefest unit, the moment, and an infinitely grand time. Since "Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery/ Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years" (28.64-5), it is impossible to say what a time *equal* to the pulsation might be, suggesting that the pulsation might transcend all finite temporal terms.

Put differently, the all-consuming intensity of the eternal might emerge from within the finite world but it does not leave this world unchanged. Rather, it gestures toward time's potential to effect what Bloch described as a transcendence without transcendence. Even if history must ultimately fall into a scheme of temporal units or submit to the repetition implied by Euthanasia's reflection on the earth's continuous solar revolution, the power of the lived moment reveals those units and the history they form to

be incapable of reflecting the complexity of a consciousness embedded in time. In this brief moment where history is felt to be radically incommensurate with its own terms, Euthanasia is more ecstatic than Beatrice or any of the supposed prophets in *Valperga*. When her sensitivity to time intensifies, she effectively dissolves the bonds of history, collapses the prison-like structure of temporal continuity: when the moment seems to become eternal, the future and past have been severed from determination, have become temporalized and opaque to the understanding.

In other words, the text does in terms of its treatment of temporality what it does at the level of narrative, for as Rajan notes *Valperga* “unseals itself from the fatality of a single story by including within the grand narrative of Castruccio the other histories of Magfreda, Euthanasia and Beatrice” (16). In this respect it is also similar to *Glenarvon* and to Shelley’s later novel, *The Last Man*, as all three texts not only adopt the themes and figures of prophecy to insert counter-factual narratives into official accounts of history but also layer private over public history. All three texts loosen the cause-effect relationship within history by illustrating not only how the historical moment could be differently determined through counterfactual supplementations but how that moment itself is also always overdetermined in reality. History’s continuities become unstable in the face of excessive and conflicting determinations. This is the case in *Lamb*, as she fractures and multiplies historical causes for her aesthetic productions. And it is also the case in *Valperga* insofar as excessive forms of prediction betray the instability they are intended to correct. Objects produced by or in this historical moment, then, cannot be ‘returned’ to history—cannot bypass hermeneutic labour—precisely because history itself is a field of competing determinations and therefore cannot serve as the stabilizing authority of natural history.

#### IV. “Some vain imagination or deceitful hope”: *The Last Man*’s History of the Future

As noted above, for Bloch, Greek prophecy as exemplified by Cassandra constitutes a “passive type of augury” (*Atheism* 103), a form of prediction that—unlike Hebrew prophecy—enslaves the past and present to a knowable but unavoidable future. Shelley frames *The Last Man* in terms of precisely this kind of prophecy. Constructing

the bulk of the text as the redaction of a nineteenth-century editor who, as the text's fictional "Introduction" explains, discovers and translates prophetic leaves found in a hidden chamber of the cave of the Sybil of Cumae,<sup>174</sup> Shelley presents an apocalyptic prophecy of the history of the future as told by Lionel Verney, the sole survivor of a global plague that leaves him, at the end of the twenty-first century, the last man on earth.<sup>175</sup> There remains, however, a gap between Shelley's framing prophecy and the treatment of prophecy within the text, represented in the figure of Evadne. Despite the brevity of her appearance, Evadne is key to understanding how Shelley negotiates the fraught relationship between sexual and historical agency and for uncovering a reading of *The Last Man* that does not fall victim to what only appears to be a completely depressing, closed, and apocalyptic picture of history. It is important, for instance, to see her as a prophetess similar to Beatrice: not only does she suffer a similar fate but her curse on Raymond inaugurates the text's "natural revolution" (Kant *Conflict* 161) or total decline, echoing Beatrice's pessimism. At the same time, she is, like Elinor St Clare, in a complex domestic position. As a young man, Adrian falls in love with Evadne. She, however, rejects Adrian, for it is "Raymond, the deliverer of Greece, the graceful soldier, who bore in his mien a tinge of all that, peculiar to her native clime" that "Evadne cherished most dear" (31). Yet, in this case too love remains unreciprocated. Evadne thus stands in the middle of a series of unrequited loves and unsatisfied desires, effectively repeating Adrian's psychological experience though in a manner that does not and cannot generate any intimacy between her and Adrian. Given this instability—Evadne's precarious position between Adrian and Raymond—there is a certain irony that she should be rediscovered in the text as the mysterious prize-winning architect.

Upon ascending to the office of Lord Protector, Raymond "projected the erection of a national gallery for statues and pictures" (76). An emblem not only of British history and culture, "the edifice was to be the great ornament of his Protectorship" (76). After reviewing hundreds of unsatisfactory proposals, "at length a drawing came [...]. The design was new and elegant, but faulty; so faulty, that although drawn with the hand and

---

<sup>174</sup> Cumae is approximately 20 kilometers west of Naples and represents the oldest Greek settlement in Italy, dating to the eighth century B.C.E.

<sup>175</sup> Four people survive the plague: Lionel, Adrian, Clara, and Evelyn. However, Evelyn dies from typhus fever and Clara and Adrian die in a shipwreck from which only Lionel escapes.

eye of taste, it was evidently the work of one who was not an architect" (77). For some reason Raymond is fascinated with this design and his inquiries into its provenance lead him eventually to "the dwellings of want" (78) and the wasting form of Evadne Zaimi. Moved by her series of misfortunes, Raymond begins secretly visiting Evadne—a decision that, like St Leon's decision, in Godwin's eponymous text, to keep secrets from his wife, Marguerite, leads eventually to domestic catastrophe. But when Raymond eventually rejects Evadne in an effort to return to his original political and domestic responsibilities, it becomes impossible to do so. That is, recalling Blake's *Milton*, Raymond finds it impossible to secure his 'state' in political, emotional, and even physiological terms. This is because Evadne, like Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*, curses the would-be politician and contaminates the state's claim—announced by political philosophers from Plato to Hegel to Adrian—to serve as the material expression of rationality itself. For instance, in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel asserts that "the state is the divine will, in the sense that it is mind present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organisation of a world" (§ 270). Evadne's curse on Raymond, however, illustrates how something deeply unreasonable remains hidden within this eminently reasonable process. A kind of workless, non-dialectical negativity thus returns like the state's repressed or unconscious and is forcefully expressed in Evadne's curse: "many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim!—By my death I purchase thee—lo! the instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors. I dared, I conquered them all, till now! I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me—Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction—O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!" (131).

In fact, with this passage and the subsequent catastrophe, Shelley's text, as opposed to Lamb's, seems to pronounce the most startling curse on the Byronic type. For it is clear that Raymond is a Byron figure and that Shelley, too, writes a *roman à cleft* that gestures toward even as it displaces actual history. In fact, Shelley seems to invoke this Byronic "idol" (28) in close proximity to Caroline Lamb. In the midst of his domestic strife with Perdita, Raymond writes a letter that in tone, length, and sentiment echoes Byron's letter to Lamb announcing the end of the affair—the letter included by Lamb in *Glenarvon*, there attributed to the eponymous villain. Raymond, playing the victim of

outrageous insult, writes in reply to Perdita's most pointed inquiry into his feelings a terse letter full of passive-aggressive manoeuvres:

Notwithstanding your bitter letter [...] for bitter I must call it, you are the chief person in my estimation, and it is your happiness that I would principally consult. Do that which seems best to you: and if you can receive gratification from one mode of life in preference to another, do not let me be any obstacle. I foresee that the plan which you mark out in your letter will not endure long; but you are mistress of yourself, and it is my sincere wish to contribute as far as you will permit me to your happiness.

(103)

Like Byron/Glenarvon's letter where he condescends to "remember with gratitude the many instances" in which he had "received [Lamb/Calantha's] predilections," asks to "continue [her] friend, if [she] will permit [him] to style [himself]," and ends with a patronising offer of "advice,"<sup>176</sup> so Raymond aims to deflect guilt and maintain control over the domestic sphere by assuming a false contrition that has the effect of belittling and deflating the intense, even overwhelming emotions Perdita expresses. Shelley's Raymond is every bit Lamb's hypocritical Glenarvon. But, while Lamb leaves Glenarvon privately haunted by his past crimes, Shelley insists more pointedly on how the damage wrought by this personality infects social institutions. Hence, Evadne's curse on Raymond for ostensibly private wrongs expands to the public and even global level. Whereas the consequences of Glenarvon's betrayal of St Clare and Calantha are quarantined in Ireland by the killing of both women in the course of the aborted revolution, Shelley recognizes a universal problem. For Raymond's treatment of Evadne

---

<sup>176</sup> It is difficult to know which source here is primary and therefore which source to cite for Byron's letter. For as Leslie Marchand notes in his edition of *Byron's Letters and Journals*, he includes the putative letter from Byron to Lamb (in the second volume, page 242) even as the only source for this letter is Lamb's 'repetition' of it in *Glenarvon*. In his note, Marchand writes, "the only copy of this letter is that published in Caroline Lamb's novel. It sounds Byronic, and Byron did not deny its authenticity when he read the book; he must have recognized it as in substance what he had written. It is ascribed to the hero, Glenarvon, who is obviously intended to represent Byron" (2.242 n1). Marchand's strange description of Glenarvon as a "hero" notwithstanding, his comments gesture toward a larger problem of originality and authenticity surrounding the material object, recalling the argument, above, that for Lamb the idol comes to reflect a form of representation that is intensely anti-mimetic and closer to pure simulation. At any rate, 'Byron's' letter can be found in Marchand's collection, as noted above, or in chapter nine of the third volume of Lamb's novel, page 271 of the first volume of Douglass' new three-volume edition of Lamb's complete works.

repeats the repudiation of femininity and female desire that forms the very basis—figuratively *and* literally, in this case—of the political state.

A closer look at the history of the Sybil who frames the narrative may help expose how a betrayal of intimacy and even sexual violence is not merely peripheral to more ostensibly fundamental matters of state. With this in mind, it becomes clear why Shelley, with the plague, evokes a Kantian “natural revolution” (*Conflict* 161)—that is, a disorder so fundamental that it threatens not only all rational projects but even the project of reason itself, the promise of the eventual unity of ‘faculties.’<sup>177</sup> For the history of the state models the ‘state of history,’ as it were—each is a form of institutional hierarchy that repeats sexualized violence and marginalization not in spite of but *through* instrumental rationality. Such a state, for Shelley, cannot be redeemed but must, rather, be entirely purged. In an effort to reconsider the place of the female in history, Shelley thus trades utopia for a kind of total catharsis: her reader is able to experience the end—as both *completion* and *elimination*—of a particular form of history and ideology by living through it *fictionally*. This is why the frame of the narrative in *The Last Man* is so important: in stark contrast to Cassandra’s curse, Beatrice’s fate, or St Clare’s vision—that is, in contrast to the form of prophecy that dominates history *inside* each narrative—the reader is, in fact, offered a more Hebraic perspective. For while the story of total human annihilation remains only a *possible* future for the reader and the fictional editor as well. Like Jonah’s prophecy, *The Last Man* might be terrifying enough to effect changes that cancel what it also promises.

Indeed, the frame narrative makes explicit that, while it offers another perspective on history, it is not a meta-perspective or meta-history. While the ‘redactor’ organizes objects that bear the traces of the future’s history, she cannot claim perfect mastery of either the objects or the future history they depict. That is, as described in the fictional “Author’s Introduction,” after discovering the “Sibylline leaves” the Author and her companion “made a hasty selection of such leaves, whose writing one at least of us could understand; and then, laden with our treasure, we bade adieu to the dim hypaethric

---

<sup>177</sup> Kant’s assurance that the human race is progressing remains haunted by a parenthetical gesture toward this kind of absolute rupture in nature. For Kant can assert that “all the peoples on earth [...] will gradually come to participate in progress [...] provided at least that there does not, by some chance, occur a second epoch of natural revolution which will push aside the human race to clear the stage for other creatures” (161).



cavern” (3). Thus, the subsequent prophecy of Evadne’s prophesy emerges only through the diligent intervention of the ‘editor’ who notes she has “been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form” (3-4). But if this order imposes a kind of distortion, it is still fundamentally necessary since, ironically, the pages are “unintelligible in their pristine condition” (4). Put in terms that anticipate the critique of politics and history discussed below, the frame of the narrative makes clear that there cannot be a state of non-distortion. The elements that form the subsequent prophecy are always already fragmented.

So, not only does this history of the future emerge through the gathering of textual fragments and the active invention of the ‘editor,’ but also it appears that there can be no simple appeal to the historical objects themselves. For even when these objects are materially at hand, they seem to disclose historical meaning only in dialogue with the fictional editor and translator’s consciousness. Hence, the narrative frame abdicates any claim to superior authority even as it displaces the inevitability of the ‘history’ depicted in the text proper by rendering that history as, at root, romance. The frame, rather than containing the text, functions more like one amongst a train of spectral messengers—recalling Percy Shelley’s *Hellas* and *The Triumph of Life*. For prophecy here, as with Percy’s text, cannot totalize time. Rather, a prophecy of the twenty-first century emerges only to be suspended in the dizzying reciprocity between the ancient pages and the nineteenth-century editor, suggesting less a stable historical itinerary than a form of temporal vertigo. Indeed, as Anne Mellor notes, since *The Last Man* “is not history but a self-conscious fiction” the ‘history’ of the future is not as determinate as it might appear. Hence, for Mellor the text “is about the possibilities of human history, not about the past as such. As such, I would like to suggest, it opens up the possibility for a new kind of history, the not-yet-written story of a new kind of society” (n. pag.). This new kind of history would emerge only on the further side of Shelley’s negative dialectic, one that aims to cancel the kind of total vision and implicit violence performed by universalizing forms of history.

One can better appreciate Shelley’s suspicion of progressive, rationalist, or essentially Hegelian history—one where, as noted above, the state as the materialization of rationality forms the actual shape of history’s end—by looking more closely at the

history of the Sibyl. Classical scholars believe that the figure of Cassandra shades into the figure of the Sibyl,<sup>178</sup> suggesting that we might more precisely identify *The Last Man's* framework in terms of Cassandra's peculiar fate. In *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, H.W. Parke reiterates the clear associations between Cassandra and the Sibyls of antiquity. Moreover, he offers a useful summary of the mythical origin of both figures in relation to Apollo and notes the important role sexual difference plays in the development of Cassandrian prophecy.

The theme of the gift of prophecy combined with the curse of failure to convince the hearers may well have been invented for this context [i.e., Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*] in the Epic cycle, but it would be equally useful if attached to Sibylla, who similarly foretold disasters which were never averted. [...]. [Beyond this common curse,] [t]he legend of Apollo, the frustrated lover, is joined [in the case of the Sibyl] with the second motif which we have mentioned—the mistaken prayer for long life, not immortal youth. It appears first in a late narrative in Ovid, who tells in his own vividly sophisticated manner what must have been a long-established legend. The Cumaean Sibyl explains to Aeneas that she is not a goddess, though she has been offered immortality if only she would yield her virginity to Apollo. The god, wooing her, promised her the fulfilment of her wish, and she grasped a handful of sand and asked for as many years as it contained grains. This was granted, but she had forgotten to ask for

---

<sup>178</sup> In "Vergil and the Sibyl of Cumae," J.H. Waszink argues that Cassandra might be identified with the Sibyl of Troy and perhaps again with the Sibyl of Cumae:

It is well-known that in later times Cassandra the prophetess and the Sibyl of Troy were considered to be so strongly related to each other that the former is frequently called a Sibyl (for evidence, cf. Bouché-Leclercq, *op. cit.*, 148/153. 1755. 1754) it is even probable that the characteristics of one the two figures derive from the other (according to Bouché-Leclercq, *op. cit.*, 148/153, and Picard, *Claws et Ephèse*, 419.421, the figure of the Sibyl is secondary; the contrary opinion is held by Buchholz, art. *Sibylle*, Roscher 4, 797). Now in vss. 1464/1465 Lycophron calls Cassandra Κλάρον Μιμάλλων (i.e., Βάχη), ἡ Μελαγχραΐρας χόπις/Νήσους θυγατρός (*schol. ad loc.*: Μελαγχραΐρας δὲ ἡ Σίβυλλα, παρά τὸ μελαίνειν τὴν φράσιω χαι τοῦς χρησμοῦς. Νησῶ δὲ, μήτηρ Σιβύλλης), in other words, he compares her to the Sibyl. It seems indeed plausible that Lycophron knew both the identification of Cassandra with the Sibyl of Troy and the tradition adopted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and others (cf. p. 48 and note 26) which declared this Sibyl to have prophesied the *fata Aeneae*.

Finally, it should be remarked that in this context a prophecy by the Cumaean Sibyl would be plainly superfluous, as Cassandra is already prophesying everything that was to be prophesied, the "Italian part" of the *fata Aeneae* included. (52)

eternal youth. Although she would have obtained that also, if she had yielded herself to him, she refused, and therefore was fated to grow older and older until she had reached the number of the grains of sand. When she was speaking to Aeneas, she had lived seven hundred years and had still three hundred remaining. By then she would have shrunk to the tiniest scale until there was nothing left but her voice. (57)

This back-story complicates *The Last Man*'s frame by combining the Cassandraian curse—the impossibility of using prophetic insight to intervene in history—as a particular mode of historiography (one Bloch identifies as especially disabling and even a-historical), with an act of betrayal that spoils a sexual contract between the male deity and the mundane woman. In an almost Dantean move, renegeing on her promise of sexual favours means that Cassandra is permitted to ‘conceive’ history intellectually but denied the power to bring that conception to term, as it were: Apollo’s curse aborts the productivity of the imagination and suspends the materiality of the female body by submitting all historical insight to rigorous limitations that ensure the gestating idea never enters the world of historical actuality. In other words, the form of female prophecy that frames *The Last Man* as a story of inevitable annihilation bears the traces of a specifically sexual conflict. For even the unnaturally long life the Sibyl enjoys transforms her only into a living testament to infertility—a figure so utterly deprived of a fruitful engagement with the world that her continued existence seems like a mockery of life. If the Sibyl lives for one thousand years, it is in a state of pure superfluity—like Mandragola in *Valperga* whom the old men remember from their childhood as already frighteningly old.<sup>179</sup>

As in *Glenarvon* and *Valperga*, it is therefore impossible to separate the treatment of prophecy and history from the treatment of sex and gender in *The Last Man*, both within the main narrative and in the framing apparatus. That is, the sense of the inevitability in Shelley’s prophecy of relentless depopulation merely generalizes Apollo’s curse and forces official (male) history to adapt its narrative to the cruel ‘abortive’ terms

---

<sup>179</sup> “On a stone near the cabin door sat the witch; she was very old; none knew how old: men, verging on decrepitude, remembered their childish fears of her; and they all agreed that formerly she appeared more aged and decrepit than now. She was bent nearly double; there was no flesh on her bones; and the brown wrinkled skin hung loosely about her cheeks and arms. She was short, thin and small; her hair was perfectly white, and her red eyes, the only part about her that appeared to have life, glared within their sunken sockets; her voice was cracked and shrill” (323).

already imposed on female historians, represented by Cassandra, the Sibyl, Evadne, and Dido: all women who must ultimately be left behind in order for the state and history to ‘progress.’ Shelley thus interrogates schemes of universal history that tend to reduce temporality and alterity to known factors, or to take historical contradictions to be simple rather than overdetermined. Such schemes elide or ignore the fruitful non-actuality of the principle of hope through their excessive and obsessive determination in a manner that has direct political implications for socially marginalized figures such as women insofar as women would be afforded a place in history only through an act of de-differentiation or de-sexualization—in lieu of outright sexual submission. For it is no accident that it is the sexually impotent Adrian’s “perfect system of government” (68) that stands as the apex of political thought and is put into practice only in the Last Days. That is, Shelley seems not to oppose female sexual marginalization with a libertine utopia; rather, she takes this marginalization to its extreme, suggesting ironically that the perfect, rational state—the kind of beautiful coherence embodied by nature throughout the narrative—can be achieved only once the lingering irrational factor standing in the way of this perfection is removed: that is, not just women but *all* humans. Evadne’s curse, then, brings death because it suspends symbolic exchange. That is, it draws attention to and disseminates violence—the deeply non-reciprocal relationship between Apollo and the Sibyl—that serves as the ground for the political order. Interrupting the symbolic has the effect then of revealing the foundational violence *of* symbolic exchange or of revealing how this deferral of violence encodes and perpetuates another kind of violence at the same time. That is, the deferral of death by symbolic exchange is not as much of a deferral as it seems at first to be. Shelley, then, refuses to let the fundamental repudiation of women be symbolized or converted into a mere figure. For, it is the symbolization of this very violence that creates the condition for universal history—that is, it allows history to take a rational shape only because it quarantines femininity as the site of a foundational and irrational violence.

What is unexpected, then, is that when Shelley exposes how the state’s claims to reason and perfection rely on a repudiation of the feminine, this perfect state begins to look more and more like a vision that Cassandra might have. In other words, *The Last Man* complicates the trajectories of repudiation typically operative in patriarchal society.

The same woman who is the rejected sexual object (Evadne)—or who claims sexual freedom (the Sibyl of the narrative frame)—and suffers a subsequent exile, seems in an uncanny way to embody and emblematised the kind of complete restrictedness and determinism that the perfectly dispassionate state would actually hope to achieve for itself. This would be an ‘impregnable’ state in every sense of the word, one immune to revolution and therefore unable to ‘conceive’ a new concept of the future. Indeed, as in the extremely ‘gentlemanly’ form of political transition depicted early on in *The Last Man* suggests, such resistance to discord approaches fascistic efficiency and insularity.<sup>180</sup> Woman is abject in this situation: she is both the figure for the perfectly managed and manipulated state even as the political institution seeks to quarantine her sexual desire, systematically excluding her from participation in the state she serves to model. That is, *The Last Man* carries out at the level of its narrative the kind of punishment for predictive accuracy restricted in *Valperga* to Beatrice and in *Glenarvon* to St Clare. Beatrice’s imprisonment and rejection in *Valperga* is an attempt to excise the supplement of prophecy for fear that that supplement may reveal a discontinuity in existing power structures. The generalization of this kind of fate to all of mankind and actual history in *The Last Man* reveals the unreasonableness of reason itself through what looks like the perfection of history and politics, insofar as the pursuit of this perfection—perhaps unconsciously—follows a model of institutional and systemic violence. Shelley pursues her critique, then, not by curtailing universal determination but, rather, by outrageously inflating and insisting upon historical totalization. In doing so, she reveals, ultimately, how disciplinary, restrictive, and even penal a perfectly rational historiography is, even if we take this in non-apocalyptic terms. That is, she suggests that Absolute Knowledge, embodied in the rational state, cannot help but perpetuate violence. This is not an apocalyptic destructiveness—in fact, that seems to be the problem. For Absolute Knowledge does not really mean the end of thinking or of history but rather the

---

<sup>180</sup> This would mean to read Shelley’s description of the ‘perfection’ of the English constitution as a somewhat ironic comment: “every thing in the English constitution had been regulated for the better preservation of peace. On the last day, two candidates only were allowed to remain; and to obviate, if possible, the last struggle between these, a bribe was offered to him who should voluntarily resign his pretensions; a place of great emolument and honor was given him, and his success facilitated at a future election” (73). Indeed, Raymond is not so much elected Lord Protector as appointed by a kind of default when “the member who had nominated Ryland, rose and informed us that this candidate had resigned his pretensions” (73).

permanent installation of a particular system wherein history and the state's smooth functioning feeds on systemic inequality.

As Greg Kucich argues in a study sensitive to the relationship between gender and history, Shelley "would situate the historicism of *The Last Man* within a broad, creatively varied effort by many of the [Romantic] period's women writers to reformulate the basic narrative and epistemological patterns of mainstream history," where this mainstream history amounts to "a gendered structure of knowledge that excluded women and other marginalized groups from 'historical and political life'" by restricting significance to a limited number of male-dominated realms of cultural action (n. pag.). Gary Kelly notes, moreover, how changes in the sense of history as such in Romanticism seemed to offer marginalized individuals, like women, an unprecedented opportunity to gain a foothold in the burgeoning discourses of historiography, which is nothing short than a foothold in a new formulation of metaphysics:

The French Revolution and the Revolution debate in Britain recontextualized the meaning of history and the use of historiography. The male polemicists of the Revolution debate recurred repeatedly to history for analogies to the French Revolution and as a guide or a warning to Britain. Yet the widely acknowledged *unprecedented nature of the French Revolution challenged the meanings hitherto derived from history and indicated the limits of historiography as a guide to the present and immediate future*, or as "philosophy teaching by examples."

In the Revolutionary aftermath various movements subsumed reformist impulses of the late eighteenth century and the Revolutionary decade, in forms less threatening to order and continuity. This sublation reconstructed models of subjectivity, domesticity, gender, locale, and nation from the proleptically Revolutionary culture of Sensibility and addressed post-Revolutionary anxiety about the groundedness, integrity, and reproducibility of discursive orders of all kinds, and personal identity, sociality, and the "nation" as a spatio-temporary condition and continuity. Resolving these issues produced the elements of the cultural revolution that founded the modern liberal state. (n. pag, my emphasis)

While Kelly places emphasis on post-revolutionary reformulations of rational containment, one might read *The Last Man*'s narrative of ruin in terms not of a positive but of a negative dialectic, as an attempt to exacerbate and protract the otherwise brief moment of revolutionary discontinuity. The plague resists post-revolutionary attempts to re-contain—discursively and institutionally to quarantine—the political from the sexual, reason from affect, or the world of male-dominated politics and the world of domestic affections. For such re-containment would simply perpetuate the closure of Absolute Knowledge rather than recognize how that closure is itself problematic.

When Mary Shelley aligns history as such with a prophecy of humanity's termination, she interrogates universal history through an aggressive irony rather than by simply replacing universal history with local, domestic, or private history. The minor histories that emerge throughout *The Last Man* do not, then, necessarily represent history's conversion from the general to the local or from the public to the private. Rather, these stories repeatedly draw attention to gender and female desire in an effort more clearly to illustrate how even in an ostensibly rational and enlightened state, it remains acceptable for women to suffer the emotional and sexual terms and conditions imposed by men. That is, within the larger framework of unmitigated disaster, Lionel feels compelled to recall, in almost Wordsworthian fashion, a series of vignettes or comparatively 'small' histories of particular characters. Three in particular stand out. There is, first, the history of the unfortunate Juliet, daughter of the Duke of L-----, who is enabled, thanks to the plague, to pursue a relationship with her lover<sup>181</sup> only to fall victim, ultimately, to the machinations of the "impostor-prophet" (281). There is, second, the story of Lucy: a young woman separated from her preferred lover and forced into marriage with a brutal man who attempts to alienate her from her family. The plague liberates her, too, to a degree and she enters the troop of English emigrants along with her aged mother. Third, there is the "simple history" (307) of the Swiss organist. Like the other young women mentioned, the plague removes class barriers and allows her, "the fair daughter of a poor musician" (307), temporarily to unite with a young nobleman.

---

<sup>181</sup> "She had lost her indulgent parents, her brothers and sisters, companions of her youth; in one fell swoop they had been carried off from her. Yet she had again dared to call herself happy; united to her admirer, to him who possessed and filled her whole heart, she yielded to the lethean powers of life, and knew and felt only his life and presence" (282).

While Shelley's decision to rewrite Cassandra's condition as the human condition itself means that Juliet, Lucy, and the Swiss organist do not escape the plague, their brief sexual liberations help to expose the violence inherent in the state that would claim to end history with the instantiation of Absolute Knowledge. Indeed, this state is not only violent but even somewhat absurd, from an existential perspective—something illustrated in Shelley's figure of enlightened, scientific rationality: the astronomer, Merrival. For like a combination of Lamb's Camioli and Dante's Farinata, Merrival seems to be cursed with a prophetic vision of history of such a grand scale that it deprives him of historical agency and awareness of the present.<sup>182</sup> At the same moment that the English finally admit their susceptibility to the plague, Merrival points out, as if to offer some sense of consolation, that "in an hundred thousand years [...] [t]he pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the elliptic[,] [...] an universal spring will be produced, and earth become a paradise" (159). This is not merely cold comfort but borders on the obscene. "The seven league strides with which Merrival paced a coming eternity" (210) detaches him from the prevailing, dire condition of humanity: "He was far too long sighted in his view of humanity," remarks Lionel, "to heed the casualties of the day, and lived in the midst of contagion unconscious of its existence" (209). Shelley, in other words, seems to parody such rational, universal history.

*The Last Man* is not, as Steven Goldsmith argues, merely a return to history aimed to counteract Percy Shelley's natural supernaturalism—his apocalypse of interior, subjective transcendence. Rather, the novel illustrates how a certain concept of history emerging in the Romantic period—one that sees its own perfection *as* the state of reason—models itself, in terms of its effort at total mastery, after the same violence it commits against 'irrationality' in its constitutive repudiation of femininity. Shelley's strategy is to allow the identification and prohibit the repudiation, essentially turning totalizing and patriarchal history against itself, just as St Clare turns against her own predictive powers in an effort to reintroduce possibility on the hither side of this suicidal gesture. *The Last Man* does not offer a clear counter-narrative—does not aim to re-

---

<sup>182</sup> As Robert Hollander notes, concerning the nature of Farinata's curse, "the present and near future are not known by the sinners, only the time to come. Most [critics] believe that what he says applies to all the damned" (183). In a sense, then, Shelley's *The Last Man* represents a new version of Dante's *Inferno* as it descends, like Aeneas in Dante's model text, into a narrative of the damned through the cave of the Sybil.



determine history according to its own ideology—but rather gestures toward a new, temporalized understanding of the future through the infinite, absolute negation of a cultural present (i.e., the early nineteenth century imagined, in its perfection, at the end of the twenty first century) that has, through the expansion of scientific rationality, attempted to claim absolute, demystified authority for itself. In other words, Shelley protracts the moment of dialectical negation, not completing history in its incompleteness—she is not that cynical—so much as ‘incompleting’ completion or inverting totalization in a manner that decouples history from rational narration, since such narratives must ultimately be disabling.

If *The Last Man* does not offer any explicitly compensatory, comforting, or completely positive narratives, this is because the greater danger seems to be that what starts as a history of the repressed might turn, itself, into another repressive history. That is, Shelley’s decision to avoid representing some kind of redemptive counter-history of the future is designed to move through or beyond rational perfection in order to open the way to a new concept of the future itself. Rather than just another future thought within the closure of what remains epistemically violent, *The Last Man* seems to envision what Benjamin called a “real state of emergency” (*Illuminations* 257), a state of re-stating that, as in Blake’s *Milton*, is ‘founded’ in self-annihilation. Thus the pandemic within the future’s history functions as something like Bloch’s atheism in Christianity, as the force of Exodus: just as an immanent atheism loosens the regressive and repressive bonds in all re-ligion and opens the possibility for a concrete hope centred on worldly life without merely replacing Christianity with a new doctrine, *The Last Man* is an heretical essay on the concept of history that breaches or ex-poses history’s self-containment by taking history to its extreme point of rationalization. In so doing, the text cannot offer a model for re-containment. In fact, culture seems—with a relentlessness nearly equal to the spread of pestilence—to spawn new universalisms that would enslave humanity under the guise of rescue. In other words history, as rational narrative, reconceived by or at the margins merely falls into the Jovian patterns of power it ostensibly transcends. This seems clear in Shelley’s treatment of the impostor prophet. For this megalomaniac illustrates what Kant called fanaticism: he serves to illustrate the danger of prematurely

abandoning the negativity of the plague, the danger of installing new positivities—states or historical narratives—before reason itself has been totally purged.

In the political and theological power-vacuum the plague creates, one man, a “self-erected prophet,” founds his own sect and “enter[s] upon various schemes, by which to acquire adherents and power” (273, 274). While this ‘prophet’ succeeds in deceiving many, what is more important is that he never deceives himself, is never confused about the selfishness of his motives. For his goal is to appropriate history, to stake a claim to the future and indebt humanity—like Pepi in *Valperga*—if not to him personally, then to the particular version of a patriarchal control he perpetuates. As Lionel writes,

If we had considered the preacher as sincere in a belief of his own denunciations, or only moderately actuated by kind feeling in the exercise of his assumed powers, we should have immediately addressed ourselves to him, and endeavoured with our best arguments to soften and humanize his views. But he was instigated by ambition, he desired to rule over these last stragglers from the fold of death; his projects went so far, as to cause him to calculate that, if, from these crushed remains, a few survived, so that a new race should spring up, he, by holding tight the reins of belief, might be remembered by the post-pestilential race as *a patriarch, a prophet, nay a deity*; such as of old among the post-diluvians were Jupiter the conqueror, Serapis the lawgiver, and Vishnou the preserver. These ideas made him inflexible in his rule, and violent in his hate of any who presumed to share with him his usurped empire. (281, my emphasis)

Not only does this episode suggest that history cannot be separated from the self-interest of historical actors but it also subtly indicts prevailing beliefs in the benevolence of transcendent justifications for the established, patriarchal concentrations of worldly power and authority. History seems ever ready to adopt some form of what Blake, noted above, called “Priesthood”: a form of social power that disguises the human will-to-power with spurious appeals to transcendent agents. Hence, Shelley’s text steadily undercuts all attempts to (re)appropriate history by one interest or another, even if that means withholding any more positive (re)formulation of the history of the repressed. For Shelley remains wary of the repressive implications inherent even in an effort of intended

liberation: to narrativize the marginal may not so much enable the marginal as submit marginality to the strictures and repudiations of rational history, effectively regulating that disadvantaged element all the more thoroughly through the very matrix of advocacy.

Ultimately, the imagination is the force behind attempts positively to (re)formulate historical schemes—schemes that, as *The Last Man*'s narrative framing makes clear, are always forms of social and, specifically, sexual control. This positivity works against the negativity of the plague. And yet, as suggested thus far, the plague's negativity represents the most powerful form of possibility and political revolution. The plague functions by deconstructing the reason behind universal history and the Hegelian state as the completion of that history. Utopian or positive visions of the political seem, by contrast, always to fall into ideological traps that simply remain within the disabling concept of history and the political whence Shelley would like to depart. The imagination seems doomed circularly to perpetuate the limits within its own condition of possibility, to imagine new scenarios only within the closure of Absolute Knowledge. Hence, in contrast to its typical Romantic valorization, Shelley characterizes the imagination as, at best, a deceptive irritation and, at worst, evil itself. As Morton Paley notes, "the nature of imagination in *The Last Man* is teasing. It presents itself as a saviour only to be revealed as a creator of phantasms" (113). For instance, Lionel's "attempt to find salvation through the imagination is ultimately no more successful" than his attempts to escape into the theatre earlier in the text (Paley 113). In fact, Paley notes that most of the characters in Shelley's text "find imagination a torment" (113). Yet, a glance back to *Valperga* would suggest that what Paley calls "the failure of imagination" (114) in *The Last Man* is not in fact a failure at all. Rather, *The Last Man* reads Beatrice's diatribe against the imagination as a critique of ideology, redistributing her diatribe across the entire surface of the narrative in the form of the plague: a thoroughly de-idealizing force. *The Last Man* seems to turn Beatrice's theory of the imagination as described in *Valperga* into a narrative of defacement that defaces history itself.

In *Valperga*, the attack on imagination comes, appropriately enough, from the character that "had inherited from her mother the most ardent imagination that ever animated a human soul" (230). That is, in the course of her invective against Euthanasia's

belief in a benevolent God, Beatrice comes finally to the imagination, at the top of her pantheon of existing evils:

And the imagination, that masterpiece of malice; that spreads honey on the cup that you may drink poison; that strews roses over thorns, thorns sharp and big as spears; that semblance of beauty which beckons you to the desert [*sic*]; that apple of gold with the heart of ashes; that foul image, with the veil of excellence; that mist of the maremma, glowing with roseate hues beneath the sun, that creates it, and beautifies it, to destroy you; that diadem of nettles; that spear, broken in the heart! He, the damned and triumphant one, sat meditating many thousand years for the conclusion, the consummation, the final crown, the seal of all misery, which he might set on man's brain and heart to doom him to endless torment; and he created the Imagination. And then we are told the fault is ours; good and evil are sown in our hearts, and ours is the tillage, ours the harvest. (343)

This is a powerful condemnation coming from someone who has suffered actual torture. The imagination does not merely fail here but works actively in the service of a hypocritical and malevolent power. The imagination, in its perhaps laudable attempts to diminish suffering or assert some sense of just Providence in otherwise thoroughly depressing circumstances, is here cast as evil's propagandist, a faculty that essentially naturalizes and justifies the most foul aspects of reality. Imagination forms the attractive covering that not only allows figures like Tripalda to elude detection and punishment but, more broadly, promotes the erroneous belief in a perfectly coherent, rational universe. From this perspective any dissent, any incoherence must be a privation or an accident rather than a legitimate counterpoint. In fact, it is just such a belief that can call reason's own violence necessity. Indeed, like the interlocutors in the Book of Job—Bloch's centrepiece in his reading of the Bible's immanent atheism—who insist on Job's guilt on grounds that he would not otherwise be subject to such brutality, so the imagination becomes the apologist for unjustifiable violence. Indeed, this is why hope, Exodus, and possibility must inhere in the present not as substantial or objective positivites. The negativity of Shelley's plague works to explode imagination's apologetic rationale.

Shelley's aim is to purge history of its confident narrative coherence by revealing that reason's systematic exclusion of irrationality—the state's foundational gesture in *The Last Man*—or the imagination's systematic obfuscation of violent repudiation relies on the denial of inherent violence.

*The Last Man's* prophetic annihilation of history—its narrative against the enlightenment narrative of historical progress—represents a vast expansion and formalization of Beatrice's concept of the imagination. In a sense, the text's prophecy is an assent to imagination's tyranny, taking imagination to the point where it encounters the unimaginable or the very conditions that would eliminate the possibility of imaginative amelioration—that is, amelioration through imagination. As such, it is necessary to adjust Paley's distinction between imagination and prophecy. Paley argues that, “countering the insufficient artistic imagination in Mary Shelley's novel [i.e., *The Last Man*] is the power of prophecy. Here as elsewhere the author's theme is in direct contrast to the politics and poetics of her late husband. There are no unacknowledged legislators here, enlarging the sense of human community through their poems. Instead, prophecy is seen as entirely divorced from human ends—impersonal, inexplicable” (115). Paley assumes that imagination's positivity is something Shelley seeks to recover through the supplement of prophecy. It seems, however, that the prophecy itself figures the limitation of the imagination. That is, the prophecy of total depopulation takes imagination's ameliorating and narrating power to the point that it cancels itself out. The aim is thus not to use prophecy in order to restore imagination but rather to journey to the end of the imagination, to the end of a kind of ideology. Despite its affiliation with ideas like freedom and liberation, the imagination in fact maintains the veil of ideology that obscures the foundational sexual violence of even the most utopian state when that state is conceived as the apex of Hegelian, dialectical history.

In an effort to gesture toward a more open kind of future—to gesture toward a new, as yet unknown paradigm for historical thought—Shelley forces the imagination to consider the unimaginable. Hence, while on the surface the narrative of *The Last Man* appears to foreclose the future the *effect* of the text, thanks to the distance offered by the framing narrative, is quite the opposite, opening toward a concept of the future, of history, and of humanity that is ‘post-apocalyptic.’ As suggested earlier, in the context of

Kierkegaard's irony, prophecy is not just predictive but always also a form of negation that suspends the same narrative it supplements. Under this ironic aspect, prophecy revokes actuality and dissolves the *status quo* in light of something unprecedented. Such prophecy, taken as an absolute preface to the future or as the power of beginning, does not establish the future's content. Thanks to the overlapping prophetesses—Evadne within the narrative proper and the Sybil who constitutes the frame—Shelley's text speaks in the ambivalent, double, or syncopated voice of the Romantic prophet. For a closer look at this prophetic overdetermination reveals, within the putatively smooth progress of official history, a foundational instability, a contradictory and systemic repudiation of irrationality in the form of femininity. Hence, what might appear to be a depressing narrative that simply predicts an inevitable human catastrophe must be understood, at the same time, as an effort to expose through parody the eventual goal of progressive, dialectical forms of history that lead to the 'enlightened,' rational state. Shelley's prophetic mode deconstructs this dialectic of enlightenment.

## WORKS CITED

- Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. Edith Hall. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996.
- . *Prometheus Bound*. Trans. James Scully and C.J. Herington. London: Oxford, 1975.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. California: Stanford UP, 1998.
- Althusser, Louis. *Essays in Self Criticism*. Trans. Grahame Lock. London: Humanities Press, 1976.
- . *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left, 1977.
- Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left, 1977.
- Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Modern Library, 2001.
- Augustine, St., Bishop of Hippo. *Confessions*. Trans. Maria Bouldings. New York: Vintage, 1998.
- Aylesworth, Gary. "Lyotard, Gadamer, and the Relation Between Ethics and Aesthetics." *Lyotard: Politics, Philosophy, and the Sublime*. Ed. Hugh Silverman. New York: Routledge, 2002. 84-99.
- Baker, Jennifer J. "Natural Science and Romanticisms." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 53.4 (2007): 387-412.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: Texas UP, 1981.
- Balfour, Ian. "The Future of Citation: Blake, Wordsworth, and the Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy." *Writing the Future*. Ed. David Wood. London: Routledge, 1990. 115-28.
- . *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002.
- Barfoot, C.C. "'Milton Silent Came Down my Path': The Epiphany of Blake's Left Foot." *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*. Ed. Wim Tiggers. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999. 61-84.
- Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*. Trans. Leslie Anne Boldt. Albany: SUNY, 1988.

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap, 1999.
- . *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- . "On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol 1 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings. Trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour. Cambridge: Belknap, 2004.
- . *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. New York: Verso, 1998.
- . *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1986.
- Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Blake, William. *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David Erdman. New York: Doubleday, 1970.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- . *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993.
- . *The Step Not Beyond*. Trans. Lycette Neilson. Albany: SUNY, 1992.
- . *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.
- . *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1995.
- Bloch, Ernst. *Atheism in Christianity: Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*. Trans. J.T. Swann. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.
- . *The Principle of Hope*. Vol 1. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Bloom, Harold. *Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom: Two Interviews*. Laura Quinney. *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*. [http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/bloom\\_hartman/bloom/bloom.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/bloom_hartman/bloom/bloom.html). Accessed 22/06/2010.
- Bracher, Mark. *'Being form'd': Thinking Through Blake's Milton*. Barrytown: Station Hill, 1985.
- Burgess, Andrew J. "The Upbuilding in the Irony of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*." *The Concept of Irony: International Kierkegaard Commentary*. Ed. Robert



- L Perkins. Macon: Mercer UP, 2001.
- Byron, George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. 9 vols. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. London: J. Murray, 1973-79.
- . *The Complete Poetical Works*. 7. vols. Ed. Jerome McGann. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-93.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Cass, Jeffery. "Irish Girls Gone Wild: *Glenarvon*, Regency Hypocrisy, and Spartan Virtue." *The CEA Critic* 68.1-2 (Fall 2005-Winter 2006).
- Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998.
- Chase, Cynthia. *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.
- Chew, Samuel C. *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame*. London: Longmans, 1924.
- Clubbe, John. "Glenarvon Revised—and Revisited." *Wordsworth Circle* 10 (1979): 205-17.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. George Watson. London: Everyman, 1991.
- Collings, David. *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline, and the Political Uncanny, c. 1780-1848*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2009.
- . *Wordsworthian Errancies: The Poetics of Cultural Dismemberment*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Dante. *Inferno*. Trans Robert and Jean Hollander. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Davies, Hugh Sykes. "Wordsworth and the Empirical Philosophers." *The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey*. Ed. Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964. 153-74.
- Deen, Leonard. *Conversing in Paradise: Poetic Genius and Identity-as-Community in Blake's Los*. Columbia: Missouri UP, 1983.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke,*

- and Proust. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- . *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971.
- . *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997.
- . *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- . "Wordsworth and Holdernin." *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*. Eds. E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- De Quincey, Thomas. *On Wordsworth's 'There was a boy.'* *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Duncan Wu. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time. I, Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992.
- Dickson, Leigh. "Authority and Legitimacy: The Cultural Context of Lady Caroline Lamb's Novels." *Women's Writings*. 13.3 (October 2006): 369-91.
- Eichner, Hans. "The Rise of Modern Science and the Genesis of Romanticism." *PMLA* 97 (1982): 8-30.
- Elliott, Marianne. *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.
- Fenves, Peter. *A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.
- Ferris, David. *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Foshay, Toby. "Introduction: Denegation and Resentment." *Derrida and Negative Theology*. Eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay. Albany: SUNY, 1992. 1-24.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- Fox, Susan. *Poetic Form in Blake's Milton*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976.
- Franks, James. *Memoirs of pretended prophets, Who have appeared in different ages of the World, and especially in modern Times; Pointing Out, from Authentic Sources, their Blunders, and the Pernicious Consequences of their Pretensions: With An Examination of some of the most Remarkable and best attested Modern*

- Predictions, Shewing that no inference can be Deduced From them in Favor of the Recent Existence of a Prophetic Spirit. By a Clergyman.* London: J. Johnson, 1795.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Vol. XVIII. (1920-1922). Ed/Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1955.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Gay, Peter. *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom.* New York: WW Norton, 1996.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* 10 Vols. London: W. Allason, 1823.
- Godwin, William. "Of History and Romance." *Things as They Are; Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams.* Eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley. Peterborough: Broadview, 2000.
- Godzich, Wald. "Introduction." *Resistance to Theory.* Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997.
- Goldsmith, Steven. *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. *Greek Philosophers from Thales To Aristotle.* London: Methuen, 1967.
- Guyer, Paul. "Introduction." *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgement: Critical Essays.* Ed. Paul Guyer. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Hall, Ronald L. "The Irony of Irony." *The Concept of Irony: International Kierkegaard Commentary.* Ed. Robert L. Perkins. Macon: Mercer UP, 2001.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.
- . "Looking Back on Paul de Man." *Reading de Man Reading.* Eds. Lindsay Waters and Wald Godzich. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989.
- . *The Unremarkable Wordsworth.* Minnesota: Minnesota UP, 1987.
- . *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1964.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art.* 2 vols. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.
- . *Hegel's Philosophy of Right.* Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon, 1942.

- . *Hegel's Science of Logic*. Trans. A.V. Miller. New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1989.
- . *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY, 1996.
- Herder, J.G. *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. Trans. James Marsh. Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833.
- Hertz, Neil. "Lurid Figures." *Reading de Man Reading*. Eds. Lindsay Waters and Wald Godzich. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989. 82-104.
- Hildebrand, Fredrick. "Epipsychidion's Cosmic Collision: A Controlling Metaphor." *The Keats-Shelley Journal*. 37 (1988): 75-90.
- Hill, Leslie. *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Josipovici, Gabriel. *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Trans. Mary J. Gregor. New York: Abaris, 1979.
- . *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Mathews. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- . *To Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. Trans. Ted Humphery. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Keach, William. *Shelley's Style*. New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Keats, John. *Selected Letters*. Ed. John Mee. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Kelly, Gary. "The Last Man and Masculine History: Between the Revolutionary Aftermath and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State." *Virtually Dead? Mary Shelley's The Last Man*. *Romantic Circles* (1997) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/villa/vc97/kelly.html>. Accessed 22/06/2010. n. pag.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.

- . *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.
- . *Prefaces; Writing Sampler*. Trans. Todd Nichol. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997.
- Kipperman, Mark. "History and Ideality: The Politics of Shelley's *Hellas*." *Studies in Romanticism*. 30 (1991): 147-68
- Kneale, J. Douglass. *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Poetry*. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1988.
- Kojève, Alexander. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Ed. Allan Bloom. Trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969.
- Kompridis, Nikolas. "The Idea of a New Beginning: A Romantic Source of Normativity and Freedom." *Philosophical Romanticism*. Ed. Nikolas Kompridis. New York: Routledge, 2006. 32-59.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.
- Kucich, Greg. "The Last Man and the New History." *Virtually Dead? Mary Shelley's The Last Man*. *Romantic Circles* (1997) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/villa/vc97/kucich.html>. Accessed 22/06/2010. n. pag.
- Lamb, Caroline. *Glenarvon. The Works of Lady Caroline Lamb*. Vol 1. Eds. Leigh W. Dickson and Paul Douglass. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Criticism and Social Change*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983.
- Liu, Alan. *Wordsworth, The Sense of History*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988.
- . *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*. Trans. Georgess van den Abbeele. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- . "The Sign of History." *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*. Eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. 162-82.
- MacLean, Gerald M. *Time's Witness: Historical Representation in English Poetry, 1603-*

1660. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1990.
- Mandelbaum, Allen. "Notes." *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*. New York: Bantam, 2004.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*. Trans. Thomas A Carlson. New York: Fordham UP, 2001.
- Matthews, Samantha. *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Mellor, Anne. "Response to 'The Last Man and the New History.'" *Virtually Dead? Mary Shelley's The Last Man. Romantic Circles* (1997) <http://www.rc.umd.edu/villa/vc97/mellor.html>. Accessed 22/06/2010. n. pag.
- McDayter, Ghislaine. "Hysterically Speaking: Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon*." *Romantic Generations: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Gleckner*. Eds. Ghislaine McDayter; Guinn Batten; and Barry Milligan. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2001. 155-77.
- McGann, Jerome. "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after *Hellas*." *The Keats-Shelley Journal*. 15 (1966): 25-41
- Mee, Jon. *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Meinecke, Friedrich. *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*. Trans. J.E. Anderson. London: Routledge, 1972.
- Milton, John. *Complete Poetry and Major Prose*. Ed Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1957
- . *The John Milton Reading Room*. [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/). Accessed 21/6/10.
- Mole, Tom. *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Morrison, J.S. "The Germanic World." *Oracles and Divination*. Eds. Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. Trans. Jeff Fort. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of*

- Literature in German Romanticism*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: SUNY, 1988.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Use and Abuse of History*. Trans. Adrian Collins. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.
- Nichol, Todd. "Introduction." *Prefaces; Writing Sampler*. Trans. Todd Nichol. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997.
- O'Sullivan, Barbara Jane. "Beatrice in *Valperga*: A New Cassandra." *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*. Eds. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 140-58.
- Paley, Morton. "Apocalypse Without Millennium." *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*. Eds. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 107-23.
- Parke, H.W. *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Patočka, Jan. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Ed. James Dodd. Trans Erazim Kohák. Chicago: Open Court, 1996.
- Pfau, Thomas. *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- Plotz, John. *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008.
- Popper, Karl. *The Poverty of Historicism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Basic Books, 1960.
- Rajan, Tilottama. "(Dis)Figuring the System: Vision, History, and Trauma in Blake's Lambeth Books." *Huntington Library Quarterly*. 58.3-4 (1996): 383-411.
- . "Introduction." *Valperga, or, The life and adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*. Peterborough: Broadview, 1998.
- . "Spirit's Psychoanalysis: Natural History, the History of Nature, and Romantic Historiography." *ERR* 14.2 (2003): 187-96.
- . *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell, 1990.
- Robertson, William. *The history of the reign of Charles the Fifth, Emperor of Germany. : and of all the kingdoms and states in Europe, during his age. : To which is*

- prefixed, a view of the progress of society in Europe, from the subversion of the Roman Empire, to the beginning of the sixteenth century. : Confirmed by historical proofs and illustrations. : In three volumes.* Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1770-71.
- Roston, Murray. *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism.* Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1965.
- Scanlon, Larry. *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works.* Ed Richard Proudfoot *et al.* London: Thomas Neilson and Sons, 1998.
- Shelley, Mary. *The Last Man.* Ed. Hugh J. Luke, Jr. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1965.
- . *Valperga: Or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca.* Ed. Tilottama Rajan. Peterborough: Broadview, 1998.
- Shelley, P.B. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* 10 vols. Eds. Rodger Ingpen and Walter E Peck. London: Ernest Benn, 1926-30.
- . *Shelley's Poetry and Prose.* Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.
- . *The Wandering Jew; Or, The Victim of the Eternal Avenger. The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* 2 vols. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000.
- Snow, Dale. *Schelling and the End of Idealism.* Albany: SUNY, 1996.
- Taylor, Peter Alan. "Providence and the Moment in Blake's *Milton*." *Blake Studies* 4.1 (1971): 43-60.
- Thulstrup, Niels. *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel.* Trans. George L. Stengren. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980.
- Tribe, Keith. "Introduction." *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.
- Ulmer, William. "Hellas and the Historical Uncanny." *ELH* 58.3 (1991): 611-32.
- . "The Politics of Metaphor in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*." *Journal of English and German Philology* 78 (1988): 535-57.
- Underwood, Ted. "Historical Difference as Immortality in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century



- Novel." *MLQ* 63.4 (2002): 441-69.
- . "Romantic Historicism and the Afterlife." *PMLA* 117.2 (2002): 237-51.
- . "Stories of Parallel Lives and the Status Anxieties of Contemporary Historicism." *Representations* 85 (2004): 1-20.
- van den Abbeele, Georgess. "Introduction." *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Vardy, Allan. *Romantic Ethics*. PhD Dissertation. University of Washington, 1997.
- Veyne, Paul. *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1984.
- Wang, Orran. *Fantastic Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Waszink, J.H. "Vergil and the Sibyl of Cumae." *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 1.1 (1948): 43-58
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.
- Wirth, Jason. "Introduction." *Ages of the World (1815)*. Albany: SUNY, 2000.
- Woodman, Ross. *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1964.
- Wordsworth, William. *Essays upon Epitaphs. The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. 3 vols. Ed. Alexander B. Grosart. New York: AMS Press, 1967.
- . "Home at Grasmere." Ed. Beth Darlington. Cornell UP, 1977.
- . "Mutability." *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*. Ed. Geoffrey Jackson. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. 197.
- . *The Prelude*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.
- . *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989.