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INTRODUCTION: THE PERSISTENCE OF ROMANTICISM

It is no news that Romanticism has had a bad press throughout much of the twentieth century, rising to a chorus of vilification in the past fifteen or so years. Romantic works are thought to suffer from overweening sentimentality and to retail a stale plot that is at best trivial and at worst a sham that distracts attention from the real forces that shape most human lives. Typically, it is thought, a Romantic poem will present an isolated male protagonist who reflects on his life in strongly subjective terms as he is halted in a particular place. The course of this reflection runs roughly: "Here I am in the woods. Life has been pretty tough. I have trouble getting along with other people, and I'm going to die. I don't feel very good about that. But it's pretty nice here, and when I look at the sunlight on the trees below, then I feel a little calmer and able to go on a bit."¹

There is more than a little truth in this caricature, and even Romanticism's defenders often revert to it. Rene Wellek notes the importance to Romanticism of reflection-in-nature, coupled with an intensified subjective diction in which individual experiences and reflections are taken to exemplify general human possibilities of an accession to meaningfulness, as he defines Romanticism compactly as "imagination for the view of poetry,

¹ I owe this characterization of Romantic poetry to Stanley Bates, who reports that something like this is the typical structure of submissions that he has had to evaluate for placement in poetry workshops.

nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style."² Donald G. Marshall similarly fills in what he calls "the common view" that in Wordsworth the synthetic, creative and sympathetic power of imagination, nourished on a popular tradition of ballad and romance with roots in the great poetry pre-dating the Enlightenment, asserted itself against an instrumentalist reason, which in poetry took the form of a masquerade in the robes of conscious and merely willed classicism. Wordsworth found the true source of imagination: in nature and particularly in the poet's experience of nature during childhood, when he was most open to its varied and spirited influence. The language in which this recollected experience was transformed into the guide of later life and feeling derived from the ordinary language of men, particularly rural men, whose lives preserved the great rhythms of pastoral and agricultural life, recorded in and meditated by the Bible, anonymous folk poetry, and related literary forms.³

Some commentators tend to emphasize one of these three elements – imagination, nature-place, or prophetic ordinary language – at the expense of the other two. Charles Larmore notes that it is "something of a cliché that the Romantics introduced a new sense of belonging" both to a place and to a particular human community identified with a specific place. Larmore defends this sense of belonging by endorsing J. G. Herder's thought that "The blurred heart of the indolent cosmopolitan is a shelter for no one."⁴ Herder returning from Italy to Weimar and Wordsworth returning from France to the Lake District are central images of Romanticism's actual and imaginative itinerary, under this emphasis. Already in 1793 Wordsworth's sense in *Descriptive Sketches* of natural sites of recovery was attacked as clichéd by Thomas Holcroft.

He is the happiest of mortals, and plods, and is forlorn, and has a wounded heart. . . . More descriptive poetry! Have we not enough! Must eternal changes be rung on uplands and lowlands, and nodding forests, and brooding clouds, and cells, and dells, and dingles?⁵

2 Rene Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Scholarship," *Comparative Literature* 1 (1949), pp. 1–23, 147–72; reprinted in Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 161.

3 Donald G. Marshall, "Forward: Wordsworth and Post-Enlightenment Culture," in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. vii–xxiii, at p. vii.

4 Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 24, 38–9, citing J. G. Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784), bk. 8, §5. See also James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), for a development of this Burkean theme in Wordsworth.

5 Thomas Holcroft, *Monthly Review* (October 1793), pp. 216–18; cited in Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 332.

Larmore elsewhere stresses the Romantic conception of the powers and importance of individualized “creative-responsive imagination,” aptly noting both that Romantic individualism stands in tension with the emphasis on belonging and that his own project is only selectively “to draw out those strands of the Romantic legacy that connect with our present interests.”⁶ According to this conception, “our sense of reality, and of the claims it makes on us, is inseparable from the creative imagination.”⁷ We see and feel and hear not just naked material quiddities, but the sunlight and the breeze in that jagged fir tree, or playing over that ruined sheepfold, together with attendant memories and anticipations of achievement and loss, endurance and mortality.⁸ The thought here is that without the exercise of imaginatively informed, thoughtful perception there is no human habitation of reality, no place in reality for human life. It is creative-responsive imagination that both finds habitations for mindedness within natural reality and envisions further ideal habitations in the face of present disappointments. In exercising creative-responsive imagination, the Romantic poet aims, in Larmore’s phrase, not only at the sublime but also at “the recovery of *the magic of everyday life*.”⁹

Hegel likewise trenchantly notes the emphasis in Romantic art on the individual mind’s internal motions of perception fused with envisioning, in order to criticize its subjectivism, himself arguing that a lasting home for humanity can be found only in the development of appropriate social institutions, not within the individual mind.

Now since spirituality has [in Romantic art] withdrawn into itself out of the external world and immediate unity therewith, the sensuous externality of shape is for this reason accepted and represented . . . as something inessential and transient; and the same is true of the subjective finite spirit and will, right down to the particularity and caprice of individuality, character, action, etc., of incident, plot, etc. The aspect of external existence is consigned to contingency and abandoned to *the adventures designed by an imagination* whose caprice can mirror what is present to it, *exactly as it is*, just as readily as it can jumble the shapes of the external world and distort them grotesquely. For this external medium has its essence and meaning no longer, as in classical art, in itself and its own sphere, but in the heart which finds its manifestation in itself instead of in the external world and its form of reality, and this reconciliation with itself it can preserve or regain in every chance, in

6 Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, pp. 7, 35.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

8 Larmore elegantly traces the attendance of perception by memory and anticipation and thought in Wordsworth’s “Michael,” *ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

every accident that takes independent shape, in all misfortune and grief, and indeed even in crime.¹⁰

The most capacious vision of Romanticism as a set of commitments draws together the emphases on nature and imagination, as it sees poets forging modes of speech, nurtured by natural places and formed in imagination, that enable them to function as the *vates* of either a nation or humanity at large, as they and their audiences might recover from political despair. Writing in 1963, M. H. Abrams argues that the central Romantic poems – preeminently Wordsworth's *Prelude*, with the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse* taken as affording its plot archetype – "turn on the theme of hope and joy and the temptation to abandon all hope and fall into dejection and despair."¹¹ Within a movement in Wordsworth's experience that Abrams terms "the apocalypse of imagination,"

the militancy of overt political action has been transformed into the paradox of spiritual quietism: under such militant banners is no march, but a wise passiveness. . . . And something close to Wordsworth's evolution – the shift to a spiritual and moral revolution which will transform our experience of the old world – is also the argument of a number of the later writings of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and, with all his differences, Hölderlin.¹²

Eight years later, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams expands this characterization as he describes a general Romantic effort "to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home."¹³ The central metaphor in Abrams's conception of Romanticism's aims, and even of its accomplishment that he would urge us to repeat, is that of rebirth, renewal, renovation in a place, on grounds, at home. This rebirth is to be shared in by humanity in general, as it awakens or reawakens to possibilities of human life in nature, through following and sharing imaginatively in the movement of the poet's exemplary mind-in-nature. Wordsworth's "song will be an evangel to effect a spiritual resurrection among mankind – it will 'arouse

10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 81. First emphasis added.

11 M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 26–72, at p. 55.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 58, 59–60.

13 Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 12.

the sensual from their sleep / Of death' ["Prospectus to *The Recluse*," lines 813–14] – *merely by showing what lies within any man's power to accomplish, as he is here and now.*"¹⁴ Humanity is to come to live not only in hope but further in accomplishment of felt meaningfulness through finding, in the poet's exemplary progress, how mind and nature are fitted to one another, so as to sustain a human life of hope, fulfillment, and social peace under the terms of a larger, naturalized-supernatural covenant.

Impressive though this picture is of the poet as seer, possessed of a powerful imagination stimulated by a natural place into the production of vision on behalf of humanity, it is also not hard to see how it can be criticized. In broadest terms, Romanticism is typically faulted, following Hegel's lead, for its subjectivism: too much visionary blathering; too little attention to both material reality and social forces. Larmore, who notes this criticism in order himself then to defend the Romantic imagination, unpacks the charge against Romanticism of *subjective occasionalism*, put forward by the early-twentieth-century political theorist Carl Schmitt. According to this charge,

Refusing to acknowledge the demands that reality places upon thought, [the Romantics] see the world as but the occasion for the artistic mind to assert its sovereignty. Reality counts only as the pretext for the imagination to express itself, to make up how it would like things to be, to "aestheticize." For the Romantic, Schmitt writes, "everything becomes an occasion for anything."¹⁵

Romanticism is here stigmatized as a poetry of self-indulgence and evasion.

This criticism of Romanticism as a form of subjectivism has taken two different but related forms, depending on the critic's sense of the natures of the material and social realities that Romanticism supposedly evades. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, and continuing up until at least the mid-1960s, Romanticism was criticized for sentimentalism, or wallowing in the personal, at the expense of a due respect for social convention, social order, and the classic. This line of criticism was most prominently furthered by T. S. Eliot, as for example in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he criticizes "our tendency," generated by our own uncritical absorption in Romantic sentimentalism, "to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁵ Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, p. 4, citing Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1919), p. 24.

anyone else."¹⁶ In fact Eliot's position, even in this essay, modulates toward something more interesting than a simple defense of the classic and of regnant social values, as he later acknowledges that "the mind of Europe . . . is a mind which changes" and that "newness is essential," at least the sort of newness that engages with and modifies an "ideal order" of "existing monuments."¹⁷ A purer defense of classicism against Romanticism appears in Irving Babbitt's somewhat earlier *The New Laokoön* (1910). Babbitt criticizes Romanticism, exemplified for him by Rousseau and Wordsworth, for its "*eleutheromania*: the instinct to throw off . . . all limitations whatsoever."¹⁸ Babbitt finds Tolstoy guilty of this in the largeness of his sympathies, Nietzsche in his resistances to any checks on his will, and Schlegel in nearly everything. To give way to this instinct is to reject a "true humanism" (189) and instead to allow one's mind simply to wander, substituting reverie for thought that grasps the nature and importance of social order. "Wordsworth," Babbitt writes, "would have us believe that to become wise a man needs merely to sit down on an 'old gray stone' and 'dream his time away.' . . . The romantic indolence . . . [has] no 'determinate object' and [is] not truly selective" (188-9). Against these lacks of selectivity and focus on an object, Babbitt defends, to the point of hysteria, "the truly classic," that which honors "the broad, masculine, and vigorous distinction" (x), in contrast with Romantic confusion, which is "intended primarily for women and men in their unmasculine moods - for the tired scientist and the fagged philologist and the weary man of business" (244). In calling for a renovated classicism in literature and criticism, Babbitt seeks to reinstall an order of decorum and taste, a set of boundaries, that is simultaneously aesthetic and social, against what he sees as a gathering flood of sentiment, populism, femininity, and confusion. It is not uncommon still to hear Romanticism described and criticized in these terms in casual conversation.

A second, stronger indictment of Romanticism as subjective evasion has developed over the past fifteen or so years, under the influence of late Marxist theories of the influence of social structures on artistic production. Romantic tracings of movements of situated imagination are seen here too as evasions of the social, but this time of the recognition of a social order suffused with opposition and antagonism. Thus John Barrell charges that the composure or balance that is represented, he thinks, as the outcome of the isolate imagination's encounter with nature in the typical Romantic

16 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Egoist* (1919); reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 2198-2205, at p. 2198.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 2200, 2199-2200, 2199.

18 Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoön* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 196.

poem is an image of human accomplishment that serves not the interests of persons in general, but the sectarian interests of the middle class and of men.

[The] notion of balance, as something which proceeds from a position beyond the political, is in fact a thoroughly political notion. That position, a middle point between and above all merely partial and particular situations, bears a close resemblance to a certain ideal construction of the situation of the middle class – neither aristocratic nor vulgar, neither reactionary nor progressive. And similarly, the balance and resolution which literary texts seek to achieve bear a close resemblance to the political balance which, in England especially, was both cause and effect of the increasing power of the middle class, and which has made the notion of “balance” itself a term of value with a crucial function in middle-class ideology, underwriting the political authority of “consensus” or the “middle ground,” by representing as irrational extremism whatever cannot, or whatever refuses to be, gathered into the middle ground. . . . The universal, the fully human position, from which properly literary texts, and properly literary criticism, can be produced, is also a masculine position.¹⁹

Even more sharply, Marjorie Levinson argues that the Romantic imagination’s encounter with nature is both a suppression of the political and, as such, a weapon in the class struggle. That encounter props up the fiction – useful to the middle class in its struggle for social hegemony – that the most important human problems can be solved through taking a walk in the woods.

Romantic transcendence is a bit of a white elephant. . . . No one would wish to deny the heroic uses of retreat, but one would wish to see whether they also serve more urgent interests, such as *accommodating* the poet to the dominant social structures, without whose recognition he has no voice to praise *or* condemn his times. . . . In order to hear again the voice of a man speaking to men, one must expose that powerful definition as a platform, one that denies the historicity and instrumentality of literature.²⁰

Working out this stance through a close reading of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” in particular, Levinson argues that the poet “excludes from his field certain conflictual sights and meanings – roughly, the *life* of things” (25): class conflict over the possession of the instruments of the reproduction of social life. “The primary poetic act [of ‘Tintern Abbey’] is the suppres-

19 John Barrell, *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 5–6.

20 Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 57, 56.

sion of the social. [It] achieves its fiercely private vision by directing a continuous energy toward the nonrepresentation of objects and points of view expressive of a public – we would say, ideological – dimension” (37–8). Levinson supports these claims by undertaking “to elaborate some general, then concrete and immediate conditions of the poem’s transcendentalizing impulse” (25), that is, to trace the linguistic mechanisms through which details of social life are noticed by the poet and then overwritten or subjectivized as privately symbolic. To a canny reader, “Tintern Abbey” then emerges as a “palimpsest” (34) whose overwritings and suppressions can be read, in specific detail, as archetypes of ultimately self-betraying Romantic evasion in general.

The charge against Romanticism of the evasion of social reality has been worked out most fully – in the widest theoretical terms and with reference to various Romantic authors and poetic strategies – by Jerome J. McGann in *The Romantic Ideology*. McGann too notes

that familiar argument of Romantic and Romantic-influenced works: that poetry, and art in general, has no essential relation to partisan, didactic, or doctrinal matters. . . . Romantic poetry develops an argument that [complex sociopolitical divisions and conflicts] can only be resolved at the level of the mind’s idea or the heart’s desire. The Romantic position . . . is that the poet operates at such levels of reality, and hence that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiencies of this time and that place.²¹

McGann too criticizes this position as an evasion and suppression of sociopolitical conflict as the real life of things. Romantic poems, he writes, “tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations. This act of evasion, as it were, operates most powerfully whenever the poem is most deeply immersed in its cognitive (i.e., its ideological) materials and commitments” (82).

A principal reason why we are now able to be aware of Romantic plots and philosophical stances as occlusions and evasions, according to McGann, is that our sociopolitical position is different. Though we are neither free of nor clear-sighted about our own entanglements in historical nexus of power and conflict, we are at least differently entangled, so that we are afforded some distance from and some vision of what is now for us past. In McGann’s formulation,

21 Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 69.

This book conceives that our present culture has advanced, for better and for worse, well beyond those forms of consciousness which came to dominance in the Romantic Period and which are the object of this study. . . . In my view ideology will necessarily be seen as false consciousness when observed from any *critical vantage*, and particularly from the point of view of a materialist and historical criticism. Since this book assumes that a critical vantage can and must be taken toward its subject, the ideology represented through Romantic works is *a fortiori* seen as a body of illusions. (13, 12)

To suppose otherwise – that is, not to see that we are beyond Romanticism, and not to “clarify and promote” our difference from it – is “to serve only the most reactionary purposes” (2) of one’s society. It is to be a conservator both of increasingly stale literary values and of social orders that can prop themselves up only through repression, in the face of the continuing historical dynamics of material class struggles.

Here McGann’s analysis, drawing on the late Marxisms of Althusser (see Chapter 9) and Macherey, emphasizes the dynamic persistence of struggles over the means of the reproduction of social life and over the social surplus generated in a reproduction cycle. Different groups have different relations to these means and different legally sanctioned entitlements to shares in the surplus; but always there is an underlying “truth about social relations: that the rich and the ruling classes dominate the poor and the exploited” (8). Romanticism – functioning in its own terms of imagination and nature as “a closed idealistic system” (9), according to McGann – is simply, or not so simply, one complex, self-deluding story about human powers and possibilities of life that is retailed by intellectuals who are themselves the “first dupes” (8) of the social system they elaborate and defend.

It is, McGann argues, all too understandable, and human, and interesting that self-deluding idealist defenses of always already-decaying social forms should be mounted, particularly by educated intellectuals who remain just at the margins of the dominant social group. But no such idealist defense of any social forms can either stand or deserve our allegiance. The configurations of social/material conflict just will change. “Time and the world’s force will obliterate the material being of the past. . . . All human culture is bound for the abyss” (147).

It is hard not to feel the force of the critical materialist-historicist stance that Barrell, Levinson, and McGann work out, and it would be unreasonable not to feel it. Human history is significantly a record of materially motivated social violence and repression. Barrell, Levinson, McGann, and other critics have found manifold bits of textual detail in which Romantic

writers seem *sotto voce* to acknowledge and then insistently to deny the social conflicts of their times. In reading for such details, criticism of this kind manages both to avoid aestheticizing the literary text into an object of absorbed but contentless formal worship *and* to escape any simple reductionism, insofar as literary texts in general are taken subtly both to reflect and to engage quasi-critically, through displacement and apparent counterplotting, with the social conflicts that surround them. It is by no means clear to which patterns of idealization, to which imaginative envisionings of human possibilities, we ought attach our trusts. Any plots of human possibility, and preeminently Romanticism's, seem – at least when most literalized – one-sided, and destined at best to function for a time as sectarian weapons in the shaping of social imagination, thence to die when the pattern of regnant social conflict changes and they are no longer serviceable.

Yet how are we to react to the facts of persistent social/material conflict and to Romantic envisionings of human possibility in the face of them? How do we react? Can we, and do we, just stand apart, critically, in clear consciousness that Romantic imagination and its material situation are simply, in McGann's phrase, "from our point of view – *different*" (2)? Is it even so clear that we have quite fully grasped the workings of Romantic imagination, when we have focused our attentions on its most literalized envisionings?

Here it is worth noticing what Geoffrey Hartman has aptly called the "special negativity"²² – the resistance to stable envisioning – of Wordsworth's style and, these essays argue, of Romantic poetic imagination in general at its most powerful. This resistance in Wordsworth takes the form of continual swerves back into self-scrutiny, as he anxiously queries his ability to formulate an authoritative doctrine of value (Chapter 6). In Hölderlin it takes the form of philosophical stuttering in syntactic ambiguity, leaving a demonstrative gesture toward his, and our, divided and self-divided condition that remains unhealed, in the face of the self-occlusion of the divine-absolute (Chapters 2, 5, 12). In Keats, and then later in Updike, it takes the form of allowing envisioning to be distracted by the protagonist's intense and unexpected engagements with sensual surfaces, such as those with which Augustine struggled in attempting to find his plot (Chapter 11). Or it takes the form of multiple, overlapping envisionings, without any single master plot, and often ending in either ambiguity or tragedy. The author's powers of envisioning human freedom and fulfillment are

²² Hartman, *Unremarkable Wordsworth*, p. 208.

exercised, but how fruitfully to go on from these exercises remains unclear (Chapters 2, 3). There is a pronounced turn in philosophical and poetic thinking toward criticism, as writers seek to find precursors for their present efforts in the articulation of value, yet where the precursors they find remain threatening, one-sided, and not quite receivable, leaving the work of criticism to go on in further, endless comparisons and shifts of attention (Chapters 7, 10).

Everywhere there is, in the ambiguous genitive of this collection's title, *the persistence of Romanticism*. Romanticism – the effort to envision human possibilities of the achievement of value, as these are achieved in an exemplary way in the career of a specially situated protagonist – persists. It remains with us as a form of scrutiny of our human possibilities, through and after the advents of aestheticism, inwardizing modernism, and wider political awareness, because of its own persistence in the open itinerary of thinking about value, embodied in its own resistances to authoritative closure. As Hartman cannily notes, in Wordsworth at his best, despite the poet's lapses into more formed moralizing – and, as the present volume argues, in Romanticism at its best – “the desire for immunity,” from pain, from suffering, from critical rejection, from human loss and repudiation, “is stronger than the achieved immunity.”²³ The fact of human desire, as other than animal need and as involving both self-consciousness and consciousness of being under the judgmental gaze of others, is bound up with an effort to achieve fluency in the exercise of human powers to shape a life as an embodiment of value (see Chapters 2, 3, 12). Romanticism's persistences are human desire's obverse face. Romantic thought presents not so much conclusions as, in McGann's useful phrase, “a drama of the contradictions”²⁴ inherent in the possession of human powers of remembering, envisioning, and partial responsiveness to the force of reasons.

McGann similarly notes Romanticism's beginnings and endings in uncertainties. Its sometime claims of accession to a full understanding of human value are qualified by its strong awareness of the evanescent character of the encountered object through which such an understanding is to come.

In a Romantic poem the realm of the ideal is always observed as precarious – liable to vanish or move beyond one's reach at any time. . . . [T]he Romantic poem . . . characteristically haunts, as Geoffrey Hartman has observed, borderlands and liminal territories. These are Romantic places because they locate areas of contra-

²³ Ibid., p. 218.

²⁴ McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 2.

diction, conflict, and problematic alternatives. In short, Romantic poems take up transcendent and ideal subjects because these subjects occupy areas of critical uncertainty. (72-3)

These beginnings and endings in liminality, even the disappearance into liminality of any clear occasions of beginning and ending, reflect, McGann argues, a sense of the problematic character of any articulation of an ideal of value. This sense in turn accounts for the Romantic poem's characteristic inconclusiveness or stumbling into multiple, conflicting conclusions, its overall lingering in process – a lingering that, for McGann, is not a face of human desire as such but rather something historically specific that we are beyond.

The displacement efforts of Romantic poetry, its escape trails and pursued states of harmony and reconciliation – ultimately its desire for process and endless self-reproduction (“something evermore about to be”) – are that age's dominant cultural illusions which Romantic poetry assumes only to weigh them out and find them wanting. (133)

The strongest form of this finding – the sharpest recognition of the complexity of Romantic processualism in disguising ongoing social violence – comes for McGann, in a perception he would endorse, in Keats's “recognition of . . . the horror entailed in the maintenance of and reproduction of the social structures – of the human life – Keats knew” (133-4). This recognition signals, for McGann, the end of Romanticism: its difference from us and our more clear-eyed, Keatsian and Althusserian recognition of how idealizations are always weapons in social struggles (see Chapters 4, 9).

There can be, in Romanticism's terms, no demonstrative argument – no proof beginning from first premises that unambiguously record ultimate realities – that Romantic persistences are anything more than such weapons, that they are rather or also obverses of human desire and imaginative power as such. Romanticism begins from a sense of being always already underway in culture and then simply stopped in coming to reflect. There is no standpoint from which reflection may be conducted apart from all cultural entanglements. The work of critical reflection takes place in *media res*, without a priori justifications for either choices of texts and problems or protocols for approaching them.

Yet it does not follow that critical reflection must simply repeat inherited cultural entanglements. For one thing, these entanglements are multiple, conflicting, and ambiguous; for another, they can sometimes be reasonably integrated, revised, rejected, extended, or balanced one against another in a course of ongoing cultural work. In place of proof, critical-

reflective cultural work may aspire to afford persuasive considerations. Such considerations may then bear on a choice between a McGann-style external description of Romantic persistence as something that is, for us, just past and a description of that persistence as something in which we are entangled. Such considerations would have to be bound up with an understanding of our own plights, powers, and possibilities, where any invitation to share in this understanding could be resolutely, even reasonably, refused. Yet such an understanding might nonetheless draw us in, by proceeding from extensions and developments of commitments and entanglements that we can recognize ourselves already to bear.

The idea of an understanding of our plights, powers, and possibilities that draws us in, yet cannot be grounded in any discovery of properties of substances, lies at the heart of Kant's critical philosophy. It is for this reason that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy remark that Kant "opens up the possibility of romanticism."²⁵ This opening up is not simply a matter of Kant's work in epistemology but much more of the relation between that critical epistemology and his conception of ourselves as open to the possibility of a free life, without, however, any possible guidance from the knowing of things. We are barred from any dogmatic knowledge of any ultimate good or any ultimate character of reality, even from any knowledge of ourselves as moral substances. We can know our empirical psychological nature and our physical nature – our likes and aversions, and our masses and chemical compositions – through ordinary scientific psychological and scientific physical means, but not our moral nature. Full self-presence as moral beings eludes us; yet we remain committed to both independence and justice, to both self-authority and human responsibility. We are open to the force of continuing obligations, to others and to ourselves, whose specific shapes in contexts can never be wholly deciphered and can never be wholly grounded in any knowledge of things, empirical or otherwise. (We may establish certain specific negative obligations not to infringe the legally enforceable rights of others or ourselves to a fair chance for the development of our rational humanity, but never the full specific shapes of positive, imperfect obligations to benevolence and self-cultivation.) In the formulation of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy,

Without oversimplifying or hardening the contours of a question that merits extended analysis, we cannot fail to note that this "subject" of morality [as Kant conceives it] can only be defined negatively, as a subject that is not a subject of knowl-

25 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 29.

edge (this knowledge suppressed "to make room for belief"), as a subject without *mathesis*, even of itself. It is indeed posited as freedom, and freedom is the locus of "self-consciousness." But this does not imply that there is any cognition – or even consciousness – of freedom, for freedom in turn is posited only as the *ratio essendi* of the moral law within us, which, because it is only a fact (a *factum rationis*, as Kant says), can provide only a *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, which produces no cognition.²⁶

What, however, is the nature of this *factum rationis*, this fact of reason that we are both free not to act on immediate inclination and further bound by an obscure normative law for the development of freedom? In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant calls our consciousness of freedom "the most insoluble of problems,"²⁷ and he argues that it stems from our prior awareness of the moral law.

We can neither know [freedom] immediately, since our first concept of it is negative, nor infer [knowledge of freedom] from experience, since experience reveals us only the law of appearances and consequently the mechanism of nature, the direct opposite of freedom. It is therefore the moral law, of which we become immediately conscious as soon as we construct maxims for the will, which first presents itself to us; and, since reason exhibits it as a ground of determination which is completely independent of and not to be outweighed by any sensuous condition, it is the moral law which leads directly to the concept of freedom.²⁸

But *do* we "become immediately conscious" of the moral law "as soon as we construct maxims for the will"? Exactly how do we do this? At first blush, I can certainly seem to myself to impose on myself the maxims that I shall take some aspirin when I have a headache or that I shall button my shirt from the top down, rather than the reverse, without any considerations of morality arising at all. "Nothing in appearances is explained by the concept of freedom."²⁹ I cannot see or hear or touch freedom somehow in objects. I must rather find it in myself, not as empirical object but as someone who imposes maxims on myself, and how do I do that? Why *must* I do that? What is the nature of this "fact of reason" that we have "consciousness of [the] fundamental [moral] law"?³⁰

26 Ibid., p. 31.

27 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 29.

28 Ibid. Compare Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1933), A547=B575, pp. 472-3.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 31.

In a number of places, Kant seems to say that our thinking of ourselves as both free and bound by a fundamental law is, as it were, a necessary *façon de penser*, something that we cannot help thinking but that we cannot know to be true. In Part III of the *Foundations*, for example, there are these passages:

Now I say that every being which cannot act otherwise than under the idea of freedom is thereby really free in a practical respect. That is to say, all laws which are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for it just as if its will were proved free in itself by theoretical philosophy. . . . Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles, independently of foreign influences; consequently as practical reason or as the will of a rational being, it must regard itself as free. That is to say, the will of a rational being can be a will of its own only under the idea of freedom, and therefore in a practical point of view such a will must be ascribed to all rational beings. . . . Freedom is only an idea of reason whose objective reality in itself is doubtful.³¹

These passages seem to say that we think of ourselves as free for practical purposes, as a kind of story about ourselves that we tell ourselves whenever we act, but a story that may or may not be true: nothing in the order of appearances confirms it. Is this enough? Why is it not illusory, or dogmatic, or both, for us to have this understanding of ourselves as free and bound by the moral law?

Looked at more closely, however, Kant's account of our commitment to thinking of ourselves as free presents that commitment as less optional, less sustained merely for the sake of practical life, and more intimately bound up with our sense of ourselves as *persons* than these passages may initially suggest. One clue to the depth, in Kant's account, of our commitment to thinking of ourselves as free comes when Kant remarks that

it is our reason which through the supreme and unconditioned practical law *recognizes itself* and the being which knows this law (our own *person*) . . . [and so] *defines the way in which [a person] can be active as such a being*.³²

To be *active as a person* is to act *according to reasons*, rather than to have one's body move as a result of the impingement of either external or internal material givens. Action, as opposed to either induced bodily motion or habitual reflex (such as buttoning my shirt), necessarily invokes a sense of

31 Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), [448, 448, 455], pp. 66, 67, 74-5.

32 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 109-10. Emphases added.

how things ought to be. Taking aspirin when one has a headache is something that, other things being equal (one does not suffer from side effects, doesn't have an ulcer, is not a young child, etc.), one has a reason to do. This reason makes the action intelligible as an action. It refers the action and its intended end to an order of reasons, according to which things do not merely happen but, rather, happen insofar as they are judged to be things a free being, acting on reasons in a context of needs, desires, and possibilities, *would* do. This reference to what a free and rational being *would* do includes not only actions explicitly done for the sake of duty (keeping promises and the like) but also prudential actions. It further includes our mental life as such, insofar as *judging* is an activity in which only a free and rational being can engage, for reasons. Hence Kant observes that

We cannot conceive of a reason which consciously responds to a bidding from the outside with respect to its *judgments*, for then the subject would attribute the determination of its power of judgment not to reason but to an impulse.³³

Judgment as such, that is to say, is *normative*. To judge *that red is a color* or *that an argument is valid* or even *that it is windy today* all involve appeals to what a reasoning being, aware of the circumstances of the case (how we sort by color, how we reason argumentatively, what is normally called calm or windy) *would* say.

In recent scholarship, Onora O'Neill has been the most articulate elucidator and defender of Kant's conception of *modal reason*: of reasons as inherently involving appeals to what all persons *would* say were they unimpededly to act in a given circumstance of judgment according to their rational nature.³⁴ She has emphasized how judging and thinking as such – not just what we typically recognize as cases of moral judgment – involve

³³ Kant, *Foundations*, [448], pp. 66–7.

³⁴ See Onora O'Neill, "Political Liberalism and Public Reason: A Critical Notice of John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*," *Philosophical Review* 106, 3 (July 1997), pp. 411–28. In this article, writing explicitly on matters of political right, O'Neill distinguishes between what agents *will* (or *would*) in certain circumstances consent to – the motivational conception of reason – from what they *could* consent to – the modal conception of reason, and she defends the latter. What matters in political philosophy, she argues, is not what agents *will* accept, but what they *can* accept (pp. 416–17). Here my usage of *would* is much closer to her usage of *can* than to her usage of *will*, and *would* seems better to fit contexts in which one is making judgments about judgments, or moves within practices, that may not require the assent of all members of a state but only of those within the practice, who are in a position to exercise reasonable judgment within it. The emphasis in both O'Neill's formulation and mine is the same: on what all agents in certain circumstances (whoever is in those circumstances) *must* say in virtue of their reason.

taking up a critical *standpoint* on what one does, trying to make what one does transparently endorsable (in the given circumstances of judgment) by rational agents as such who act as such. Taking up this critical standpoint involves “*self-discipline* or *autonomy* in thinking,”³⁵ or what one might conceive as thinking coming into its own, as shaped by reasons. As Pawel Luków usefully develops O’Neill’s point, the fact of reason is “a fact *sui generis*, constructed out of reflection on the possible activities of our reason.”³⁶ According to O’Neill, the Categorical Imperative – the imperative to act, including the acts of judging and thinking, only on the basis of reasons that all others *can* accept – “is the fundamental strategy not just of morality, but of all activity that counts as reasoned. . . . The Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reasoning not because it is an algorithm either for thought or for action, but because it is an indispensable strategy for disciplining thinking in ways that are not contingent on specific and variable circumstances.”³⁷ As Charles Taylor puts it, “even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents.”³⁸

Kant himself claims, poignantly and in a little-noticed passage, that “in the final analysis there can be but one and the same reason which must be differentiated only in application.”³⁹ There is no ultimate distinction among theoretical reasoning, prudential reasoning, and moral reasoning. Each of these forms of reasoning, though they differ in application, in circumstances of exercise, and in governing principles, involves an appeal to what reasons as such command in situ, hence to what all rational agents would assent were they to act as rational agents. That we submit ourselves to reason’s authority is not optional and for the sake of ourselves in practice alone (as though we might be at bottom other than we are in acting); it is rather built into the very structures of thinking and judging, which are themselves practices.

It is hard to understand metaphysically how and why this is so. The best we can do, Kant observes, is to “comprehend [the] incomprehensibility [of the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative], which is all that can fairly be demanded of a philosophy which in its principles

35 O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” in O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 51–65, at p. 56.

36 Pawel Luków, “The Fact of Reason: Kant’s Passage to Ordinary Moral Knowledge,” *Kant-Studien* 84, 2 (1993), pp. 209–21, at p. 215.

37 O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy,” pp. 58–9.

38 Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 1–19, at p. 11.

39 Kant, *Foundations*, [391], p. 8.

strives to reach the limit of human reason."⁴⁰ But to the extent that reference to the normative authority of reasons is built into the very structures of thinking and judging as themselves things that we *do*, we then become able – accepting an image of ourselves as thinking and judging – to see how it is “impossible for the subtlest philosophy as for the commonest reasoning to argue freedom away.”⁴¹

If we are – at least within this image of ourselves: and can we refuse it? – necessarily involved in thinking, judging, and acting in an effort to live according to reasons that anyone would endorse, rather than being driven always only by impulse, then it is hard to see how we could take a fully external attitude toward Romantic persistence as something that is simply past. We seem to be caught up in what Robert Pippin, paraphrasing Fichte, has usefully called “an *active* ‘positing’ of one’s stance toward nature and one’s desires not originally determined or caused by one’s relation to nature or such desires.”⁴² This active positing is “‘the condition for the possibility’ of all relations to nature”⁴³ in which thinking, judging beings stand as thinking, judging beings. One’s ordinary awareness of things is itself informed by the implicit awareness that what one is doing when one is remembering, thinking, or imagining “*is* an act of remembering, thinking, or imagining,”⁴⁴ itself caught up in an active effort to live according to reasons. To engage in this active positing is, in Pippin’s useful distinction, “not to be *subject* to various motivational forces, but to be the *subject* of one’s deeds.”⁴⁵

Being oneself the *subject* of one’s deeds, including one’s thinkings and judgments, in turn supports a moral aspiration to be such a subject *fully, freely, and wholly according to reason*. As Kant puts it,

Man must give [the] autocracy of the soul its full scope; otherwise he becomes a mere plaything of other forces and impressions which withstand his will, and a prey to the caprice of accident and circumstance.⁴⁶

40 Ibid., [463], p. 83.

41 Ibid., [456], p. 75.

42 Robert B. Pippin, “Heideggerian Historicity and Metaphysical Politics,” in Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 395–414, at p. 404.

43 Ibid.

44 Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” in *Idealism as Modernism*, pp. 29–55, at p. 39.

45 Pippin, “Hegel’s Ethical Rationalism,” in *Idealism as Modernism*, pp. 417–50, at p. 425.

46 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 140.

As beings who are open to the authority of reasons, we bear an aspiration “to live freely,”⁴⁷ fully in the light of reasons we have articulated for ourselves, in awareness of the nature and proper functioning of our own powers, rather than imbibing them from things.

Suppose we find this image of ourselves as thus caught up in an effort to live freely to be inescapable, and suppose further that Romantic persistence enacts this effort, in awareness of its difficulties. None of this makes arriving at a life of freedom any easier or any more open to being guided by specific rules. One will have to balance and integrate *independence* – being unimpeded by others and undetermined by external givens, in both thinking and acting, in favor of submission to self-imposed norms – with *coherence*: having one’s thinking and acting be transparently endorsable by others, and by oneself at another time, as reasonable in situ, rather than being torn apart by conflicting internal desires or being caught up in necessarily nonnegotiable social conflict. This is no small task. It is all too tempting, even seemingly right-minded, to domesticate such an impossible aspiration to freedom. Why not suppose instead, as ethical naturalism in the style of Bernard Williams or Harry Frankfurt urges, that we do best *not* to pursue this aspiration to freedom, but instead honorably and decently to accept the determination of reasons, in contexts, by desires that are simply, somehow, given? Why can’t, or shouldn’t, practical reason be more modest, less moralized? Why isn’t Romanticism, with its “height” of aspiration, for us a thing of the past? Or why shouldn’t it be?

Yet it is, perhaps, not so easy thus to domesticate an aspiration to freedom, however difficult it is to fulfill it. The fact of human desire, as opposed to animal want or need, involves awareness that this-thing-that-is-F is what one desires. We do not, in desiring, simply incline toward things but rather conceptualize them as things toward which we incline. Here our inclinations stand open, as conceptually structured, to assessment in the light of reasons. Is it true that acquiring this-thing-that-is-F (acquiring this commodity, establishing this relation with this person, developing this ability), given my particular talents, limitations, and circumstances, will bring me into a free life – a life I and others can endorse as free – in light of reasons? The possibility of questioning of this kind is built into desiring as opposed to brute wanting. We seek, in and through desiring action, to be fully the subjects who we are. In Pippin’s formulation,

47 Pippin, “Introduction,” in *Idealism as Modernism*, pp. 1–25, at p. 24.

If I act thoughtlessly, unreflectively, or in mere conformity to prevailing conventions, I have declined to become the subject of my own deeds, allowing the direction of my life to be charted by others and by a complex of contingent psychological factors. I achieve this status – “subject” – by being able to evaluate my inclinations and needs, by being directed by good reasons that I recognize as such. . . . The great dispute . . . is, What will *count* as such rational self-determination; especially, what sort of self-legislation will not thereby create a self-alienation?⁴⁸

That there are givens of material inclination is not to be suppressed in the name of submission to some empty and arbitrary ideal of rationality. These givens are rather to be evaluated and integrated, or reshaped, within a specifically shaped free and reasonable life in situ, thus avoiding self-alienation. The necessities of avoiding self-alienation, and of leading a life that is both specifically one's own and endorsable as reasonable, without the simple suppression of all material givens, do not make the task of realizing an aspiration to freedom any easier. One must somehow both “stand above” and reflect on the worth of what one deeply wants – on whether fulfilling that want would sustain a life of freedom – without suppressing all concreteness and material specificity.⁴⁹ As David Wiggins usefully puts it, “we need to be able to think in both directions, down from point to the human activities which answer to it, and up from activities . . . to forms of life in which [persons] by their nature can find point.”⁵⁰ Romantics are paradigm practitioners of this doubly aimed, doubly moving thinking in situ.

Hence Romanticism in its persistences receives the problem of leading a life of freedom as a standing problematic ideal: irrepudiable yet in no way readily or clearly realizable. In the twentieth century, as modernism, Romanticism takes the form of an effort to find not so much a fully shared social *solution* to the problem of freedom but rather a *voice* to bear, at least in part, recognizably, a power to address that problem, if not to solve it. Here one arrives at voice through the criticism and imaginative refiguration of existing practices. Hence voice comes to its critical and refigurative authority partly through comparisons among numbers of finite, partial exemplars of freedom, and hence further in awareness of its own limitedness (see Chapters 7–12). In attempting to achieve, enact, and sus-

48 Pippin, “Hegel, Ethical Reasons, Kantian Rejoinders,” in *Idealism as Modernism*, pp. 92–128, at pp. 98–9.

49 See *Ibid.*, pp. 96–7.

50 David Wiggins, “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62 (1976), pp. 331–78, at pp. 374–5.

tain a critical authority that is always partial and problematic, both Romantic and modern writers live out a standing fear of nonexistence (see Chapters 6, 10, 12). If one does not write, reflect, judge, one finds one's sense of oneself as a subject collapsing, in immersion in the conventional and in material givens. If one does write, reflect, and judge, so as to work out a critical relation to conventions and material givens, one is in danger of disengagement, in danger of mad, solipsistic preoccupation. Either way, one's life as a subject remains problematic. Romantic writers and thinkers, whether poets or novelists or philosophers, whether in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, are those who write and think anyway.

When one thus writes anyway, in awareness of both the irrepudiability and immediate unrealizability of a free life, with and for oneself and others, there is often a pronounced shift away from the declaration of results and toward immersion in the process of coming to voice, toward writerliness. Following Hegel, but rejecting his dismissal of Romanticism, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe this as a shift toward *autopoiesis*, the attempt to write a self-writing poem that instances the possibility of coming-to-voice that it takes as its subject.

Romantic poetry sets out to penetrate the essence of poiesy, in which the literary thing produces the truth of production in itself, and thus . . . the truth of the production *of itself*, of autopoiesy. And if it is true . . . that auto-production constitutes the ultimate instance and closure of the speculative absolute, then romantic thought involves not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*.⁵¹

To conceive of the absolute as literary, or as to be pursued through a poem or narrative that tracks and enacts coming-to-voice, is to abandon an observational standpoint in favor of immersion in a process. It involves sustaining a sense of the deferral of arriving at definite results, a deferral that, in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's formulation, "aggravates and radicalizes the thinking of totality and the subject. [The literary Absolute] *infinetizes* this thinking,"⁵² casting it as ever aiming at freedom, rather than securing it. This sense of simultaneous direction toward and deferral of the achievement of freedom accounts for the predominance in Romantic writing of remembrance and anticipation rather than of present statement of the features of things. The absolute or freedom or the divine lures the poet as

⁵¹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, p. 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

occluded: in Wordsworth as "something evermore about to be,"⁵³ in Hölderlin as the sense that the Heavenly "once were here and shall come again,"⁵⁴ and in Cavell as a "conception of philosophy as the achievement of the unpoetical,"⁵⁵ as a sense "that neither side must win"⁵⁶ as the self-interrogating imagination of our possibilities of freedom goes on. Though there remains a pressing concern for the evaluation of human possibilities, there is a shift in writing away from demonstrative argument and the form of the treatise and toward narrative. Romantic narratives leave us, in Cavell's phrase for what surrounds serious philosophy generally, more with "a trail of images of themselves preparing for philosophy or recovering from it"⁵⁷ than with definite results.

These images of preparation and recovery, and these shifts into writerliness, have various faces in Romanticism's development. In Hölderlin there is a kind of philosophical stuttering and a defeat of definite statement by syntactic ambiguity. The self-occlusion of the divine forces the interruption of the poet's powers of definite statement and shifts the poet always back into the registers of remembrance and anticipation. In Wordsworth there is a turn always back to the rescruity of the poet's fitness or power to speak about values. The special negativity of Wordsworth's narrative imagination is his sense, in tension with his wish to describe definite shapes of value, of having always to retest and recover his own imaginative authority in the face of its all-too-likely repudiation by its intended audiences. In Byron there is, in McGann's apt description, "an escapist gesture of a special sort: not into the future, or into art, but into the flux of everything which is most immediate, a flight into the surfaces of poetry and life, the dance of verse, the high energy of instant sensations and feelings,"⁵⁸ as though to preserve at least a space in sensation for the operation of imagination and its cultivation of independence, when that space seems nowhere present in public life. In Keats, there is a similar escapist lingering in aestheticism; in Shelley, a combination of meliorist futurism and

53 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805), in Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), bk. VI, line 608, p. 216.

54 Friedrich Hölderlin, "Brod und Wein" / "Bread and Wine," trans. Michael Hamburger in Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 187.

55 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 22.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

58 McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p. 127.

Platonic idealism.⁵⁹ In Coleridge and in Fichte, there is a continual, self-consuming search, a search with its own narratable shape, as in *Biographia Literaria*, for starting points from which one might reason one's way to cultural authority via a specific discursive understanding of the conditions of freedom.

In twentieth-century modernisms there are both escapes into the allures of inward artistic subjectivity and a move toward a more hard-edged criticism of the vulgarity of the current shapes of public culture. Modernism's inwardnesses and efforts at hard-edged criticism remain marked, however, always by the worry that they are little different from the subjective intensities that they would reject and by a consequent fear of fraudulence.⁶⁰ A free modernist constructivism, running provocatively against the grain of public culture, runs the risks of emptiness, lack of resonance, and the simple repetition of the gestures of scandal. Yet there is no ready way back to a naïve standpoint; there is no simple return to sentiment and nature that is artistically convincing; there is no simple evasion of the modernist agons of Schönberg, Pound, or Joyce that continue Romanticism's efforts by other means, under increased consciousness of social complexities and hostilities. (Hölderlin's poetry, both Romantic and, in its difficulty, modernist, is perhaps the richest response to our plights.) Always it is the dramatic movement, either the effort to compose a specific understanding of lived freedom or the frustration of that effort, that draws us in, as Romanticism lasts longer than we might have thought, in the very movement of its own persistences.

Persistence in the effort to arrive at voice, on behalf of the rational transfiguration of one's self and social life into a joint life of freedom, involves a poet, philosopher, critic, or artist in what Kenneth R. Johnston has aptly called the "practices of any truth-claiming subject."⁶¹ To be caught up as a subject in the practices of claiming truth about transfigurative possibilities of individual and social freedom, contrasted with present individual and social plights, is to experience culture simultaneously as a present violation of possibilities of the expression of rational nature – as a scene of violence – and as a clouded vehicle and object of aspiration. Johnston's description of Wordsworth's fitful efforts to complete a sketch of the British Navy fleet in harbor at the Isle of Wight – a sketch that later appears with

59 See *ibid.*, pp. 116–17.

60 See Cavell, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," both in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 180–237.

61 Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, p. 843.

more smoothness, more artifice, and less intensity in Book x, lines 290–305 of *The Prelude*—captures the dynamic of the bearing of a sense of culture as jointly violation and vehicle of possibilities of free life.

The poem's problem . . . is the speaker's inability to negotiate between his distress over social crises and his love of natural beauty. War fleets spoil a beautiful sunset here, as a ruined economy and rigid marriage laws cause promiscuous intercourse and illegitimate children in the "Letter to Llandaff." Nature has been violated by Culture: history, politics, and war. Wordsworth literally cannot establish any interaction between the natural scene and the shadow of the human institutions which lay cross it: the British navy. The "tranquility" conventionally associated with a picturesque sunset is canceled out by the "sunset cannon." But after stuttering through this crisis point, his descriptive powers suddenly revive, and he ends up with a poem different from the one he started. The fragment seems to be a sonnet whose structure has been blown apart by an afterthought, exposing the author's determination to be true to actual experience.⁶²

Wordsworth in this fragment aims initially at sanctification of the present, at showing that the scene he beholds is a fit habitation for humanity; but his closeness of attention to what he actually beholds undoes this aim, leaving him stuttering, in possession of a different poem from the one he began, and seeking, but not knowing how, to arrive at prophetic voice. Then, somehow, he goes on. He here enacts concretely Kant's sense in his "History" essay (see Chapters 2, 3, 8) of natural places and cultural antagonisms alike as both affordances and hindrances.

To take as one's focus "the practices of any truth-claiming subject" requires an elucidatory criticism in which critical remarks both describe and stand neighbor to their objects, rather than assuming a loftier evaluative standpoint above the antagonisms that are played out within these objects. Numbers of cultural works and descriptive criticisms of them must together come to form a *perspicuous representation* (see Chapter 7), in which one might see in the similarities and differences of neighboring cases how the plight of humanity in nature and culture is borne. Or one might not. The possibilities of vision that a perspicuous representation affords can themselves always be refused. This kind of writing—Romantic or critical—is powerless to enforce its perceptions through demonstrative argument.

The plights and possibilities of human subjects as bearers of intentionality are tracked, in this kind of criticism, as always involving both openness to the force of reasons, associated with a desire for rational transpar-

62 Ibid., pp. 344–5.

ency to oneself and others, and the frustration and continuance of this desire in and through its encounters with cultural antagonisms. As Charles Larmore develops a thought of Romanticism that he endorses, "We cannot honestly profess a wholehearted identification with any inherited way of life."⁶³ Our condition is more immigrant than that, more marked by critical reflection and by a desire for rational transparency that we know not how to still.

There are some shifting stylistic marks of the bearing of an intense sense of standing human plights and possibilities. These marks are especially prominent in Romantic writing, whether philosophical, poetic, novelistic, or dramatic, as signs of its persistences.

(1) There is a pronounced antidogmatism, a sharp sense that no encounter with any external objects will yield the practice-transfiguring, practice-guiding knowledge for which one longs. This antidogmatism is often specifically expressed as the sense that one's human life, one's life as a subject, has no recoverable or scrutable starting point. In but one of Wordsworth's renderings of this sense:

Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown even as a seed,
Who that shall point as with a wand, and say
"This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain"?⁶⁴

Or there is Hölderlin's sense that the bearing of identity as a subject results necessarily from an original "*arche-separation*" of intentionality from Being as such, "that separation through which alone object and subject become possible,"⁶⁵ with the consequence that intentionality in its discursiveness is left adrift: open to captivation by a natural Being that it dimly remembers in certain spots or moments, but unable to merge with that Being, except apocalyptically, through death or madness (see Chapters 5, 12).

(2) There is likewise a sense of failing to arrive at a final destination or restoration. Plots tend toward cycles of what M. H. Abrams, adapting Neoplatonic terminology, has termed *procession* and *epistrophe*.⁶⁶ a fall out of a sensed power to speak and into the fragmentation of voice and identity,

63 Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, p. 69.

64 Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), II.206–10, p. 76.

65 Hölderlin, "Judgment and Being," in Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 37–8, at p. 37.

66 Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 146–54.

followed by a movement of recovery. In the register of moods, this movement is reflected as the familiar Romantic alternations of melancholy and joy. Without a sense of final recovery, however, the careers and moods of protagonists are marked more often by sudden swerves than by smooth progress. ("But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might / Of joy in minds that can no further go, / As high as we have mounted in delight / In our dejection do we sink as low; / To me that morning did it happen so. . . .")⁶⁷ Throughout these swerves, protagonists remain caught between momentarily felt prophetic power and lack of full accomplishment. As Laurence S. Lockridge elaborates Schiller's view in "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" of our failures to arrive at full freedom, Schiller

defines the predicament of modern life as desire. . . . The condition of desire, once innocence is lost, can never undo itself. Schiller's vision is teleological and self-realizationist: we should strive for a harmony of the faculties greater in kind than innocent harmony. But it is a harmony that will forever elude us.⁶⁸

Our condition remains an immigrant one: not quite one of achieved freedom and at-homeness, but not one either of an utter want of power (see Chapters 2, 11, 12).

(3) Conjectures typically displace or undermine confident assertions of assured accomplishment or progress. A kind of anxiety at one's possible unreality as a person-thinker-writer haunts efforts at prophetic speech, in a kind of stuttering hesitation. ("If this be error, and another faith / Finds easier access to the pious mind. . . .")⁶⁹ These qualifications of assertion then often modulate into a plea or prayer for one's reception as a person-thinker-writer in the responses of longed-for successors. Someone – it is imagined, hoped, but never quite known – may come after to testify to the exercise of visionary power, which can never confirm itself but is always haunted by the anxieties of possible madness and nonexistence.

(4) Formally, Romanticism's persistences in conjecturalism, without secured guiding *arche* or *tele*, is reflected in the predominance of less closed forms: fragments, unfinished works, notebooks, and aphoristic collections. As Johnston draws the connection between uncertain Romantic envisionings, Romantic swerves of mood, and literary forms,

67 Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), IV.22–6, p. 166.

68 Laurence S. Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 83.

69 Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), II.419–20, p. 88.

[the] paradoxical relation between inspiration and dejection [resulting from a confrontation between human imaginative powers and the unanswerable problem of evil] explains better than almost any other set of Romantic texts the uncanny connection between the power of Romantic imagination and its tendency to produce magnificent fragments at least as often as it produces satisfying aesthetic wholes.⁷⁰

Coming face to face with human suffering, and with a thousand thousand other reminders of the lack of fulfillment of prophetic vision, Romantic writers find themselves not quite able to finish their thought. They seek to sanctify a transfigured present: Romanticism does not look toward a purely ideal world apart but seeks to find its restorations in the common day. Yet the present it would sanctify resists the instauration of transfigurative prophetic vision, by displaying ineliminable remainders of cruelty, violence, ugliness, pettiness, and hate. Romantic writers thence come not only not to complete their thought but to doubt their very capacity for vision and commitment, and often thence to revert to irony, so as to express what Larmore has called a sense of “essential nonidentity between the commitments we have and our ability to commit ourselves.”⁷¹ Fragmentariness, irony, escapism, and other failures of closure of thought are less evasions than they are the honest consequences of thought’s sense of its own material situation and limitations.

(5) Nonetheless, in some works there is a moment of gratitude: in the concluding turns more fully toward human address and audience in certain poems of Wordsworth and Hölderlin; in the sense, in Updike and Hardy, that both one’s mortality and one’s human life, however obscure, are shared; and perhaps above all in the achievement of performative closure in certain works of music – the *rondo allegro* finales of Mozart’s piano sonatas, the ecstatic release of the *presto* third movement of Bach’s Italian Concerto (BWV 971) after a somber *andante* second movement, or the *allegro molto vivace* third movement, after a second movement *adagio* of overwhelming intensity, of Kodaly’s unaccompanied cello sonata. Such accessions of gratitude are beyond empirically determined flows of sensation. They are rather connected fundamentally with our finite lives in time, as beings open to the possibility of a freely expressive life, yet unable quite to realize that possibility fully. As Kant notes, “it is a waste of labour to go burrowing behind these feelings for motives; for they are immediately con-

⁷⁰ Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, p. 564.

⁷¹ Larmore, *Romantic Legacy*, p. 82.

nected with the purest moral sentiment: gratitude, obedience, and abasement."⁷² The protagonist-writer-composer's face is turned once again toward the human, in acceptance of the finitude, the folly, and the depth of human life in time.

72 Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), §86, Remark, p. 113: translating "Demütigung" as "abasement" rather than "humiliation."