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About this Volume

This hypertext volume of essays had its inception at a session on Romanticism and Conspiracy at the Boston NASSR Conference, in November 1996. The text is encoded in HTML, with some extensions for HTML 2.0, including a limited use of tables and frames. It will work best with Netscape 2.0 or a comparable browser; earlier browsers may not display everything properly. Although the essays are arranged "linearly" so that following the Introduction are the pieces by Gilmartin, Wheatley, Mahoney, and Pfau, they can, of course, be accessed through links on the Contents page in whatever order you choose. Because you may enter and exit these files along multiple paths, you may have to use the back-arrow button on your browser to return to your starting point. The full text of the volume, like all hypertexts in the Romantic Circles Praxis Series, is fully searchable. The essays were marked up in HTML by John Morillo.

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Romanticism and Conspiracy

Introduction

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1. During the 1960s history seemed in many ways to be an apocalyptic proposition; not coincidentally, at that same time, a revitalized Romantic literature occupied a central role in literary studies in North America and Great Britain. The apocalyptic tendencies of a Romanticism based on imagination and revolution spoke vividly to a period characterized by the reflexivity of intense social change and the perverse normalization of believing in an impending nuclear holocaust. Now, as the 1990s draw to a close, some years after the end of the Cold War, apocalypse is still surely with us; we have witnessed, however, its dissemination into a variety of fragmented, sometimes contradictory scenarios, a fitting predicament for an era fixated on the paradoxically twin phenomena of global consciousness and local knowledge. Arguably, today we no longer turn to apocalypse to bring human history together into one shared destiny; rather, our cultural and political discourses evince a totalizing epistemé based on another coordinate, one that very much colored the apocalyptic tone of the 60s, but which has now risen to prominence in its own right. If the 1960s have come to mean the age of apocalypse, the 1990s signal the age of conspiracy; as all the essays in this volume attest, such a situation still resonates with the age that we now call Romanticism.

2. Conspiracy, of course, is a tricky thing. The desire to unmask a--or *the*-- conspiracy, the desire for a totalizing perspective, is always met by conspiracy's self-defining proposition that it can never fully be known, that the absence of conspiracy is its best evidence, and that *the* conspiracy always turns out to be just a conspiracy, one counter-plot to a plot's many counter-plots, oscillating proof for either a synecdochic whole or an infinite metonymic chain. This tension between totality and heterogeneity, underlying the always virtual component of any possible conspiracy, certainly speaks to our postcontemporary, postmodern existence. The same could be said of conspiracy's attendant experiences of doubling, betrayal, paranoia, and surveillance.

3. Such qualities might at first seem alien to a period associated with the emotive aesthetics of Romantic sincerity, but an extended consideration of Romantic history and topoi proves otherwise. Indeed, the years associated with British Romanticism arguably rival our own *fin-de-siecle* in their debt to the explanatory powers--social, philosophical, and cultural--of conspiracy narratives. Towering over that period as the embodiment of the conspiracy hermeneutic was, of course, the French Revolution, an event whose very unfolding, as François Furet has argued, was largely generated by ghostly, self-referential structures--perhaps unsatisfactorily called rumors and innuendo--of both Jacobin and anti-revolutionary activities. If Furet's revolution seems itself to be composed of a series of responses to plots and counter-plots, imagined or otherwise, the French Revolution as some symptomatic conspiracy of alterity bearing down and transforming history was a common point of departure for many who lived during and after its convulsions. From that perspective Burke's *Reflections* is best understood as part of a spectrum of texts, including works by Abbé Barruel, John Robison, and Seth Payson, that warned against the Illuminati conspiracy that threatened all the established governments of Europe. (Is it too hard to imagine a tract with Robison's 1797 title, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe* circulating through cyber-space today?) For many, the Illuminati were responsible for both the American and French Revolutions. At such a point conspiracy absorbed all other narratives, becoming the totalizing motor behind history itself.

4. But if history was a conspiracy the inscription of this dynamic within the political and cultural

discourses of British Romanticism was an uneven, heterogenous set of effects that belied conspiracy's totalizing imperative. Certainly, the Great Britain that warred with France and its Revolution, and then with Napoleon's Empire, was a fertile site for the conspiracy hermeneutic and its accompanying affects. As Jerome Christensen has recently suggested, the Romantic writing produced between the "last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decade or so of the nineteenth" should in fact be considered "wartime poetry" (603). But if fear of invasion and enemies abroad produced a policy of paranoia for English conservatives, state oppression begun in the 1790s against sympathizers of the Revolution and supporters of domestic reform produced an equal atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion for those on the English left. And, as the first three essays in this volume attest, the rhetoric and epistemology of conspiratorial thought also acted in varying, emphatic ways upon the imaginary of the second generation Romantics. Retrieving the pervasiveness of conspiracy during the Romantic era therefore means retrieving the variety of forms that the suspicions and representations of conspiracy took. It means retrieving local instances of conspiratorial logic both at the material level of institutions, policies, and events and at the figural level of writings; it means considering the machinations of Romantic conspiracy in terms of its heterogenous forms as well as various content. The essays in this volume start to explore these levels of significance for a Romanticism steeped in conspiracy.

5. Kevin Gilmartin's essay, "William Cobbett and the Politics of System" explores Cobbett's resistance against the British conservative belief that domestic clubs and societies for reformists and radicals were outgrowths of one monolithic conspiracy against England. As Gilmartin shows, Cobbett's tactic was to exchange this monolith for a more complex historical causality, the volatile agency of "system" which blocked British reform for the working-class and the poor. The domain of Cobbett's rhetoric and activism, where he articulated the machinations of system, very much overlaps with what Habermas has called the "sphere of publicity"; in different ways Kim Wheatley's "Paranoid Politics: Shelley and the *Quarterly Review*" and Charles Mahoney's "Periodical Indigestion: Hazlitt's Unpalatable Politics" also focus on the relation between a conspiratorial dynamic and the public sphere, specifically the public world of early nineteenth- century British periodicals. Wheatley's essay examines the relation between Percy Bysshe Shelley and the "fiercely" Tory *Quarterly Review*, a periodical whose 'paranoid style,' a totalizing discourse of self-aggrandizement and persecution," attacked Shelley as Satanic rebel. Wheatley suggestively argues that Shelley's letters and play, *Prometheus Unbound*, respond to the journal's demonization of him, by at once critiquing and participating in the antinomies of conspiracy theory rhetoric. Mahoney's article focuses on William Hazlitt's thoughts about the politics of periodical criticism, a politics mediated by the contradictions between public taste and populist sentiment, the tropes of food and digestion, and the goal of circumventing the ire of the "literary police." Mahoney thus explores one Romantic writer's negotiation of conspiracy's attendant experiences of surveillance and policing; in doing so Mahoney demonstrates how in Hazlitt those terms occasion a more complex relation between politics and language, one that includes not only a representation of the political but also a politics of the figural. Mahoney thus redirects the analysis of Romantic conspiracy away from simply its historical groundings to conspiracy's figural relation to Romantic writing. Thomas Pfau's essay, "Bringing about the Past: Prophetic Memory in Kant, Godwin, and Blake," further explores that dynamic, extracting from Romantic discourse a topoi of obsessive, retroactive intervention that strains toward a Romantic epistemé of prophetic, paraonoid certitude. For Pfau Romanticism is at once an origin for this "conspiratorial logic" and its product, insofar as the contemporary historicist study of Romanticism has implicitly assumed Romantic knowledge to be a form of conspiracy.

6. Could this type of paranoid reading be an explanatory model for literary studies in general since the 1980s? That very question reintroduces the tension between a totalizing perspective and an unavoidable local knowledge with which we began. The relation between Romanticism and conspiracy invites the possibility of a theoretically transcendent view, even as it offers a number of discrete, immanent incidents, historical and rhetorical, as signs of its articulation. Like conspiracy itself this tension will most likely never be solved. This is not to say it should be shunned, nor should the thought

that the critical act might always simply be the distillation of a constitutive suspicion. Both predicaments only mean that we have more work to do: the truth, like Romanticism, is out there.

7. Thomas Pfau's and Kim Wheatley's contributions were originally commissioned for a special session on Romanticism and Conspiracy at the 1996 NASSR conference. Charles Mahoney's and Kevin Gilmartin's essays were solicited for this volume. Gilmartin's piece is an excerpt from his book, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth- Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); it appears here as part of an ongoing collaboration between Romantic Circles and Cambridge University Press, showcasing excerpts from a number of works in Cambridge's Studies in Romanticism Series. Romantic Circles Praxis Series would also like to thank Joseph Vicomi, the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, the Library of Congress, and the William Blake Archive for the links between Thomas Pfau's essay and the illustrated plates from *Urizen* from the Archive; and the collection of John Howard for this volume's cover and table of contents image.

   Cover and table of contents illustration: LCS plotters seized: *Search-Night, or State Watchmen, mistaking Honest-Men for Conspirators*, by James Gillray (1798)

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Romanticism and Conspiracy

William Cobbett and the Politics of System

Kevin Gilmartin, California Institute of Technology

This paper is extracted from Chapter Five of my book, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). I am grateful to Josie Dixon and to Cambridge University Press for their permission to reprint this material here, and to John Morillo and Orrin Wang for their assistance in preparing this paper for *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*.

1. Given William Cobbett's extraordinarily single-minded obsession with an "all-corrupting and all-degrading system" of political oppression and economic injustice that had, in his view, dominated British life at least since William Pitt's direction of the wars against Revolutionary France, and given his own assurance that he had devoted his career to analyzing "all the grounds, all the causes, all effects, all the various workings of the thing; all the whole history and mystery of this grand delusion" (*Register* 36 [1820], 684-86), it is curious that some of his most incisive critics agree on nothing more than that he was not a systematic writer. E. P. Thompson maintains that "Cobbett's thought was not a system but a *relationship*" with his audience; Raymond Williams suggests that "to analyze his work . . . is not to articulate a system but to consider certain dominant themes"; and Gertrude Himmelfarb agrees that "Cobbett's writing reminds us how untidy, unstructured, unfocused his world was" (Thompson, 758; Williams, 28; Himmelfarb, 229). While Cobbett's own sense of system no doubt differs from that of these critics—allowing, as it does, for the contradiction and "outrageous inconsistency" (Hazlitt, 7: 57) that have troubled commentators since Hazlitt—his work needs to be understood as a serious and systematic response to an increasingly systematic world. "Unstructured," "thematic" approaches, and impressionistic readings of "relationship," risk overlooking the logic and cunning that run through Cobbett's prose, and his related practices of publication and circulation.

2. For Cobbett as for his contemporary William Blake, system was a powerful and potentially oppressive means of ordering the world. The two writers conceived this ordering process in different ways, differences that correspond loosely to the definition of system as either "a set of principles" or "an organized or connected group of objects."(1) Where Blake contended with a system of mental categories, Cobbett set out here as elsewhere from "the physical means of sustaining and reproducing life" (Williams, 38), and with a keen post-revolutionary awareness of the dangers of aligning radical energy with abstract speculation. His understanding of system stressed concrete institutions and practices, an order of things with important consequences for the human mind and manners. Where a Blake dictionary has entries under Golgonooza, Luvah, and Reason, a Cobbett dictionary, were one to be compiled (and it would be no less useful), would have entries under Pitt, Canning, paper money, potatoes, and turnpikes. Blake was, in addition, more thoroughly dialectical and ironic in his approach to system. He created his own system to avoid being imposed on by other systems, yet recognized that ordering the world and having it ordered for you were not mutually exclusive activities. To the Angel's

complaint in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "thy phantasy has imposed upon me," the figure of the poet shrewdly responds, "we impose on one another" (Blake, 42). Blake answered systematic imposition on its own terms, in order to promote the strife among contraries that would cast all systems into the consuming fires of Orc, but he did not envision an end to dialectical strife. Cobbett, by contrast, did seek to get beyond system and political dispute, in order to recover for himself and the nation a rural and domestic repose more like Blake's Beulah than like ongoing mental fight. Rather than creating his own system, Cobbett set out to describe and account for a corrupt system that already existed, in order to elicit its contradictions and encourage the popular resentment that would hasten its downfall. Although sometimes prepared to mimic the system in order to oppose it, he was unwilling to yield completely to the complex dialectics of system and countersystem; this hesitation was one of the chief sources of his inconsistency, and of the energy and tension of his prose. Part of the fascination of his career is to see how closely he shadowed the system while resisting its corrupt influences. Cobbett's aims, too, were more purely combative and exclusive than those of Blake. The imposition, as he saw it, was all on one side. System was a totalizing mode of social organization, in the service of political domination and economic exploitation; it corrupted a prior utopian order and opened an alarming chasm between starving productive laborers and idle consumers. Cobbett claimed few systems as his own, and rarely used the term in a positive sense.(2) Where the "English Jacobins" of the 1790s had proved vulnerable to the charge of systematic conspiracy, Cobbett turned the tables in launching a relentless attack on the systematic organization of British elites and the British government in an age of counter-revolution. If he sometimes conducted what Hazlitt called "systematic opposition," as in "the present *haranguing system*" of the *Rural Rides* (*Rural Rides*, 1: 118), this was a provisional attitude forced upon him by corruption, and very much a "present" contingency. His own oppositional practices were as precarious as the system, and tended to dissolve before utopian presentiments of reform. Put too systematically, the difference between Blake and Cobbett was a difference between poetry and prose, between vision and understanding, between making and remaking, and between revolution and reform.

3. The greatest misapprehension of Cobbett's system would be to see it as reductive and simply monolithic. The biographer John Osborne proposes that "hatred of the 'System'" is "the key to Cobbett's thought," but finds that Cobbett became "a prisoner" of his one idea: "Of course, there was no single 'System' at all. Cobbett was a perennial oversimplifier and looked instinctively for unqualified explanations . . . Though a seeker after the uncomplex when dealing with issues, Cobbett himself was a bundle of contradictions" (Osborne, 16, 35, 36). On the contrary, I would argue, Cobbett's sense of system involved a simultaneous urge towards simplicity and complexity; he was at once "a bundle of contradictions" and a model of absolute single-mindedness. If he insisted that oppression had a single nexus, located as Osborne observes in the "interlocking tyranny of government creditors . . . and owners of seats in the House of Commons" (Osborne, 16), he constantly revised his political analysis in the face of shifting interests and alliances within the system. Constant mutation and a proliferation of terms were part of what made systematic power difficult to detect and resist: "Thus is tyranny aggravated by its complexity" (*Register* 19 [1811], 1060). Cobbett's own famous shift from late eighteenth-century loyalist to early nineteenth-century radical led to charges of inconsistency in his own lifetime, which he met with characteristic flexibility and aggression, first dismissing the "doctrine of consistency" as "the most absurd that ever was broached" (*Register* 15 [1809], 816), and later reversing the charge by publishing accounts of the "Shocking Inconsistency" of his enemies (*Register* 41 [1822], 626).(3)

4. Cobbett was acutely aware that radical reform confronted not one but "several systems" (Register 21 [1812], 3), directed by several hands. Throughout his writing, oppressive power was disturbingly fragmented and fragmenting. It may be useful to recall some of the many systems identified and

analyzed in the Political Register, though this risks the condescending parody into which Cobbett criticism has too often degenerated:

> system of conquest smothering system barracks system system of pauperdom system of anti-Jacobinism comforting system system of public corruption system of slavery cow system child-bed-linen system church-going system industry system system of finance military system monkish system Pitt system tea-drinking system potato system system of banking system of spies system of watching calumniating system system of learned fraud system of exclusion system of beggary Manchester system tract sytem system of influence system of gambling feudal system system of paper-money funding system borough system

Such a list conveys the extraordinary range and specificity of Cobbett's idea of system, and suggests too the scope of his own countersystematic imagination, which could apprehend with equal seriousness and anxiety the sublime terror of Napoleon's "general system of conquest" (*Register* 18 [1810], 636) and the quaint incursions of the philanthropist's "child-bed-linen system" (*Register* 16 [1809], 113). What an inert list cannot communicate, however, is the sense of urgency and order that pervaded Cobbett's writing, and the complex relationships that structured these disparate elements and made them *systematic*. The system could not be reduced to a discrete set of objects (paper money, linen, potatoes), individuals (spies, priests, boroughmongers), or institutions (church, banks, parliament), but included too the practices through which these were assembled and organized. Cobbett once glossed the term system as a "settled method of proceeding; a fixed line of conduct" (*Register* 18 [1810], 970), and insisted that the "change of system" he sought was "not so much a change of *men*, as a change of *principles*, a change of maxims and rules of government" (*Register* 16 [1809], 833). His own oppositional analysis exposed the implicit and often deliberately hidden "maxims and rules" of a corrupt system, and tried to disrupt their "fixed" and "settled" character

5. Countersystematic analysis had to penetrate misleading surfaces to disclose an underlying structure. To this end, and with all his hostility towards industrial production, Cobbett often figured system as an instrument or "*grand machine*" (*Register* 29 [1815], 334), operating "with steady pace" and dynamic "powers of motion" (*Register* 25 [1814], 580).(4) This figure contained a revisionist polemic, since it placed the latest model of disruptive social change in the service of an older, more organic sense of corruption, and held the government rather than factory labor or production responsible for disorder.(5) The mechanical model revealed a good deal about Cobbett's own countersystem, as in this passage from an 1805 article on "The Budget":

> The art of *financiering* consists principally in multiplying and confusing accounts, till, at last, no one has courage to undertake an examination of them. The way, therefore, to detect a financier of the Pitt school, is, to fix upon some one point, and that, too, a point as simple as possible in itself, and that will not very easily admit of being disfigured and confused. When my attention was first attracted to the subject of finance, it appeared to me, that a gross deception was played off upon the people annually; but, an annual exposition of every little wheel, peg and wire in the immense machine, would have been an endless task. I, therefore, fixed upon one single point, namely, the *surplus of the Consolidated Fund*. (*Register* 7 [1805], 289)

From a lowly "single point," Cobbett proceeded outward by a kind of synechdoche through "every little wheel, peg and wire in the immense machine," to an overarching system of paper money and its manipulation in the Pitt system of finance. Complexity was broken down into manageable units for the purposes of analysis, but the analysis finally insisted that each unit was part of the larger system. Throughout his life Cobbett traced the mysterious threads and wires of corrupt connection with

unwavering tenacity, whether his subject was a "system of paper-money" that "seems to depend for existence on war" (*Register* 25 [1814], 9), or a system of "potatoe diet" that turned out to be "a component part of the tea-drinking system" (*Register* 29 [1815], 167). The number of systems often multiplied to accommodate new evidence, but all were part of one "immense machine."(6) If Cobbett like Blake used the principle of connection or "ramification" (Register 28 [1815], 261) to represent a world in systematic terms, it was essential to his argument that the representation was not visionary, but a prosaic and slavishly mimetic account of the only world that existed.

6. Where mechanical terms indicated the work done by system and countersystem, Cobbett used more conventional organic figures to trace the origin and development of corruption:

> The system of managing the affairs of the nation . . . has made all flashy and false, and has put all things out of their place. Pomposity, bombast, hyperbole, redundancy, and obscurity, both in speaking and in writing; mock-delicacy in manners, mock-liberality, mock-humanity, and mock-religion. Pitt's false money, Peel's flimsy dresses, Wilberforce's potato diet, Castlereagh's and Mackintosh's oratory, Walter Scott's poems, Walter's and Stoddart's paragraphs, with all the bad taste and baseness and hypocrisy which they spread over this country; all have arisen, grown, branched out, bloomed and borne together; and we are now beginning to taste of their fruit. (*Cottage Economy*, 118)

The prospect of reform hinged on the claim that the life of system was a life of corruption, destined to end in blight and decay. While Cobbett resisted political quietism, warning that "the *seeds of destruction*" were like other seeds "often of very slow growth; and the plant, unfortunately, too long in ripening" (*Register* 19 [1811], 1060), he was prepared to follow the logic of organic connection to its natural conclusion: the entire system would collapse if key components were sufficiently debilitated. "The Boroughmongers would fain shake off the fund-holders; but they cannot. Both must live, or die, together" (*Register* 35 [1819-1820], 303). This became a favorite argument during the heady post-war years of popular unrest and agricultural depression:

> *All* has been sublimated, and, if the farmers come down, all must come down. Aye, and John Bowles and Southey and Walter Scott must find their level as well as the rest. The chariot-riding proprietor of the Times must return to the humble trade of his father; John Bowles must write last-dying-speeches and confessions; Southey must make and sing his own ballads, and Walter Scott write Christmas carroles and new histories of the Children in the Wood. (*Register* 29 [1815], 175)

An intricate structure demonstrated that "all must come down together," and that the system could never be represented adequately by a list of discrete elements. Though his writing was saturated with facts and calculations, Cobbett did not enter the popular market for encyclopedias of corruption like the *Black Book*. Instead, the *Political Register* grew more discursive after the war, as Cobbett devoted his energies more and more to long essays proving that a "sublimation" of the system was imminent. Rather than allow the arbitrary order of the alphabet to disperse Pitt's paper, Wilberforce's potatoes, and Scott's poems across the printed page, Cobbett insisted on yoking everything together through his own vigorous argument and analysis.

7. Finance, and paper currency above all, seemed to Cobbett the weakest link in a corrupt system, and the most promising "point" of radical resistance. He frequently addressed the problem with rhetorical and political strategies of distinction, summed up in the antithetical title of his 1815 *Paper against Gold*. His letter "To the Stocking-Weavers" extended a radical boycott of taxed commodities to paper money,

urging workers to keep their savings close at hand "in *metal money*": "Put it into no *funds*, no *saving banks*, no *societies*, no *common stock*; for, all these *must*, at last, rest upon the *Paper System*, than which a cobweb is not more fragile" (*Register* 39 [1821], 125-26).(7) Yet the fragility of a corrupt system of finance could also justify intervention, in the more ironic style of radical countersystem. In 1819 he developed a plan to "*puff-out*" the system by flooding England with counterfeit currency from his privileged position in exile. The lifelong opponent of paper money reinvented himself as enthusiastic counterfeiter. Like John Wade's theory of "*virtual* controul," Cobbett's "puff-out" rested on the sense that a historical shift in oppressive power from force to fraud required a corresponding shift in political resistance. Under the new regime of paper, Cobbett complained, "a printing press, a ton or two of rags every year, and an engraver's tool" had done more harm "than all the powder, ball, cannons, swords, and musquets that Europe contains" (*Register* 29 [1815], 334-35). Though terribly effective, this "system of rule" could not help but precipitate appropriate weapons of resistance: "They know that neither dungeons nor gags will protect them against this weapon. And, therefore, they are trying all their tricks to prevent the imitation of their paper . . . They are reduced to beg the aid of engravers, who may abandon, or betray them at pleasure . . . But what then? They can make nothing that cannot be imitated" (*Register* 35 [1819-1820], 48-50). The "*puff-out*" was an eminently dialectical strategy, a trickster's response to "all their tricks"; like Blake's "Bible of Hell," Cobbett's counterfeit money was a satirical debasement of a debased form. By answering paper not with gold but with more paper, he hoped to unleash disruptive energies embedded in corruption ("the system . . . has put all things out of their place"), which would then consume debased system and countersystem alike. Despite his own strident declarations of independence, a good deal of Cobbett's resistance to corruption can be traced back to the insight that "they can make nothing that cannot be imitated."

8. The struggle against the system and its modern financial instruments (commerce, banks, funds, stocks, paper) was in many ways a struggle over how people should be linked with one another in society. Under the corrupt surfaces of the world of the *Rural Rides*, Cobbett could discern traces of an ancient and less centralized agricultural society, loosely joined by market towns and traditional patterns of deference. He insisted that the "commercial system" of Pitt "*must* have a corrupting tendency" because it formed "men together into large companies, or bodies" (*Register* 12 [1807], 900), and introduced improvements through which wealth flowed from the countryside to the city: "Talk of *roads* and *canals* and *bridges*! These are no signs of *national prosperity*. They are signs of *accumulated*, but not of *diffused* property, and this latter alone can insure *national prosperity*, which, rightly understood, is only another name for the *general happiness of the people*" (*Register* 19 [1811], 589). Corrupt concentration could be discerned wherever the system took effect. An early *Register* campaign against the distribution of military honors through the Lloyd's Committee hinged on the fear that control over "the distribution of honours and rewards" would make the "little government at Lloyd's" into "the *centre of the whole nation*" (*Register* 8 [1805], 851, 903; *Register* 11 [1807], 102). The characteristic habitations of modern life, "jails, barracks, factories," state-sponsored schools, and "populous cities," also corrupted "by their condensed numbers" (*Advice*, 250-51). Cobbett famously renamed the system "the Thing" in an attempt to update the organic figure of corruption and the venerable theory of mixed government for an age of consolidated machinery, bureaucracy, and global capital:

> After seeing that about three or four hundred Boroughmongers actually possess all the legislative power, divide the ecclesiastical, judicial, military, and naval departments amongst their own dependents, what a fine picture we find of that wise system of *checks* and *balances*, of which so much has been said by many great writers! What name to give such a government it is difficult to say. It is like nothing that ever was heard of before. It is neither a monarchy, an aristocracy, nor a democracy; it is a band of great nobles, who, by sham elections, and by the means of all sorts of bribery and corruption, have obtained an absolute sway in the country . . . Such is the government of England; such is the *thing*

> which has been able to bribe one half of Europe to oppress the other half. (*Register* 33 [1818], 377-78)

If Cobbett frequently answered this terrifying concentration with a program of diffusion that recalled country-party politics, he did not necessarily repudiate structure nor even central authority. In his early rebuke to the Lloyd's Committee, he insisted that military rewards "should pass through the hands of His Majesty" (*Register* 8 [1805], 853). As he lost faith in the crown and his position radicalized, this central role was taken over by a reformed parliament, and by the massive figure of "Great Cobbett" himself. An effective countersystem had to meet the system on its own terms. Since corrupt parliamentary elections were "the very foundation upon which the system stands" (*Register* 38 [1821], 181), radical resistance should apply itself to a single point: "all these evils would be cured by . . . a *Reform of Parliament*" (*Register* 31 [1816], 533). For strategic purposes, the issue between Cobbett and his enemies was less centralization than the choice of centers.

9. Cobbett's willingness to reproduce the central posture of the Lloyd's Committee was among the most striking instances of radical egotism. Even as he struggled to sustain the popular character of reform, Cobbett found himself caught up in the ebb and flow of power from a systematic center. His "History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom," a series of letters written in 1817 to justify his flight from England after the suspension of Habeus Corpus, endorsed the scattered energies of popular resistance. The demand for "*Universal Suffrage*" issued from "the People": "They had taken the thing into their own hands. They no longer looked up to Palace Yard, nor to the Guildhall of London. They had met all over the kingdom; and, they had shown, that they wanted *no leaders*" (*Register* 32 [1817], 558-59). At the same time, Cobbett organized the movement around parliamentary reform, and took personal credit for the fact that the system's old "*divide and subjugate*" strategy no longer succeeded in dissipating political resentment through futile "bickerings and divisions":

> My writings tended to sweep away for ever this source of influence; they tended to withdraw the attention of the people from these petty disputes; they tended to make them one firm and united body in the cause of Reform. From all quarters and corners I called them to listen to me. I raised the standard of plain common sense, of sound reasoning, intelligible language, and the whole people gathered around it. (615-16)

Political struggle was personalized on both sides, for Cobbett went on to justify his exile through the construction of a mutually constitutive radical martyrology and demonology (Thompson, 604). "Stewart of the Courier, Walter of the Times, William Gifford and Southey of the Quarterly Review, and hundreds of others; but, these four men in particular," had called "for *new laws*, to protect the Constitution against the 'Two-penny *Trash*'" (616). The powerful myth of his persecution at the hands of a few demonic individuals shifted attention from "the whole people" to his own larger than life figure, and to the central "standard" he raised. To reach democratic organization, repressive legislation had to pass through William Cobbett, the source of "the *poison* that was *weekly* going forth to the people in 'Two-Penny *Trash* publications'" (616). Whether he was fighting gangs hired to intimidate supporters at a Coventry election, or riding undeterred through weeks of rain in the *Rural Rides*, Cobbett offered his own vigorous body as the medium through which a people would again become "one firm and united body." This said, it is important to keep in mind the contingency and mobility of Cobbett's own figure in opposition. The failure of his early bids for a seat in parliament, the eccentric itinerary of the *Rural Rides*, and the composition of the "Last Hundred Days of English Freedom" in exile, all confirmed that the central standard-bearer of reform was himself radically decentered and displaced, an itinerant sign of the system's ravaging effects on its victims.

10. The translation of system and countersystem into demonology and martyrology raises the vexed problem of agency, and of Cobbett's reputation as a crude conspiracy theorist (Green, 167). While Cobbett was prepared to treat injustice and exploitation as structural features of a specific form of social organization, he launched his assault on system with an acute sense of the tactical necessity of reversing official charges of Jacobin conspiracy, and he insisted on holding individuals, and above all politicians, to account for the depredations of system. The idea of "the Government vortex" (*Register* 23 [1813], 741) as a feature of corruption was useful to him, rhetorically and analytically, because it generated causal explanations. He spent a lifetime sorting through newspapers, parliamentary papers, legislation, legal proceedings, and crop reports for evidence of the obscure causal relationships that linked subordinate systems first to each other—"the *real* cause of the increase of the paper-money" was "*the increase of the Debt*" (*Register* 18 [1810], 488), "the real cause of the war with France" was "the *dread of a Parliamentary Reform in England*" (*Register* 21 [1812], 558)—and then to the final cause or "source," parliamentary corruption. "Look well at the evils we endure, and that we apprehend. Trace them back to their cause; and you will find them meeting at this one point: the House of Commons elected as it now is" (*Register* 13 [1808], 863). The *Political Register* was unapologetically didactic, a relentless and sometimes violent initiation into the arcane causal mysteries of the system. "I teach them how to know the cause of all the misery they see amongst the poor," Cobbett once wrote of his readers, "I point out to them those who are the real cause of it, and, then I beat at their breasts 'till I force out loud indignation and bitter curses against the guilty party" (*Register* 21 [1812], 168).

11. Whether so complex a system could be managed by any one "guilty party" remained obscure. When Cobbett refused "to ascribe" the Pitt system "to *contrivance*," on the grounds that this "would be to give to Pitt and his followers too much credit for profundity" (*Rural Rides*, 1: 87), he may simply have wanted to deny his enemies even a bad eminence. There was, however, a more important point at stake here too, one that went to the heart of the idea of system. As the set of "maxims and rules" that governed social life, system appeared to mark the limit of human agency and intention. In his attacks on party, Cobbett extended the "measures not men" tradition of political opposition by replacing personal influence with terms like "thing," 'instrument," and "machine."(8) This mechanistic language informed his self-destructive understanding of corruption, and made the "change of system" he often demanded seem a matter of political necessity. The Whigs, he insisted in 1809, would only find themselves in power if they were "called in . . . not by the voice of the people, or by the good opinion of the king, but by the *necessities of the system*": "It is the *system* that is in fault much more than the men; and, therefore, those are fools, who look to any set of men, without a change of that system" (*Register* 16 [1809], 376, 428). Despite this instrumental analysis, Cobbett was nothing if not a vindictive writer, always ready to substitute the term "author" for the more abstract "cause." His prose worked at every level to lend corruption an intentional structure, from its saturation with capitalized and italicized proper names, to its formal organization in public letters to ministers and other prominent individuals. The system was an instrument, but it was "advised and carried on" by "*those persons*" in positions of responsibility: "The set of men that now rule are pursuing, without any deviation at all, without any patching or botching, the system of [Pitt]; and, if that system, or *any part* of it, is to be still pursued, my sincere wish is, that it may remain in their hands" (*Register* 18 [1810], 1083, 1136-37). If Cobbett sometimes drew on the sense of impersonal determination that was emerging in economic and sociological analysis, he was ruthlessly critical of any effort to use the disappearance of agency as an excuse for existing conditions, or worse yet, as a pretext for transcendental explanation. Nothing infuriated him more than the mystifications of politicians and preachers who resorted "to a supernatural agency," and held "that it is *Providence who has been the cause of our misfortunes*" (*Register* 22 [1812], 613). This capitulation of responsibility was itself part of the deceptive logic of system. Cobbett responded by uncovering a mass of "calculations" and "evident intentions," and by insisting that political and economic decline could "never have taken place" without a human cause: "There must have been something, and something done *by man* too, to produce this change, this disgraceful,

this distressing, this horrible change. God has not afflicted the country with pestilence or with famine . . . To *man*, therefore, must we look for an *account* for these evils" (*Register* 36 [1820], 5-6).

12. Personal agency governed countersystem no less than system. As Cobbett initiated his readers into the intentional mysteries of the system, he insisted on the counter-intentions that resistance would require. The radical translation of independence from property (as alienated labor) to labor and mind restored the sense of personal control that an appeal to "*Providence*" tried to deny. Political strategies like the boycott of excised commodities encouraged a sense of popular sovereignty in the face of parliamentary corruption and a restricted franchise. *Cottage Economy* brought increasingly complex and global economic relationships back to the confines of the family and the cottage yard. Cobbett's linguistic theories were, as Peter Manning has observed, grounded in a "simple intentionalism" that encouraged readers, writers, and speakers to seize control of their words: "Grammar, perfectly understood, enables us, not only to express our meaning fully and clearly, but so to express it as to enable us to defy the ingenuity of man to give to our words any other meaning than that which we ourselves intend them to express" (Manning, 10; *Grammar*, 7-8). The *Rural Rides*, too, were governed by an extensive vocabulary of purpose—"object," "intention," "determined," "plan," "project," "search," "resolved" (*Rural Rides*, 1: 85, 144, 171, 198; 2: 359)—and their intentional structure converged in the two principal activities of the hero, writing and riding: "I intended to go from UPHUSBAND to STONEHENGE, thence to OLD SARUM, and thence, through the New Forest, to Southhampton and Botley, and thence across into Sussex, to see Up-Park and Cowdry House . . . I must adhere to a certain route as strictly as a regiment on a march. I had *written* the route" (*Rural Rides*, 1: 321). Yet the text of the *Rides* displayed Cobbett's political and economic dispossession as fully as it exercised his remarkable self-possession. Disciplined "intention" and "route" were often frustrated by the dispersal of systematic effects across the countryside. If the *Rides* were a military march, they were also the negation or demonic parody of a religious pilgrimage, with Cobbett the "Plaintive Pilgrim" tracing his own "PROGRESS" as he went "to pray for Justice at the Shrine of the GREAT UNPAID" (*Rural Rides*, 1: 250). Even the term "PROGRESS," which might satirically describe a single ride, was too optimistic and consecutive a term for the project as a whole. The Rider proceeded with horrified fascination on an eccentric and endlessly repetitive series of tours, and passed again and again from "rotten-borough" and "villanous place" to "infernal WEN" and "ACCURSED HILL" (*Rural Rides*, 1: 231, 356; 2: 368, 379) (9) Deprived of his farm at Botley and of a secure place in rural society, this "Pilgrim" was without a home and without a destination. His intentions remained as complex and manifold as the effects of corruption.

13. Like his "march" in the *Rides*, Cobbett's campaign to analyze the system was constantly subverted by the irrational structure of corruption, which seemed always to escape the limits of representation. I have already discussed the way his account of a "chain of dependance running through the whole nation" trailed off in a gesture of infinite regression, indicating the failure rather than the completion of encyclopedic analysis: "Army, navy, church, the law, sinecures, pensions, tax offices, war and navy offices, Whitehall, India-house, Bank, contract, job, &c. &c." Structural and explanatory categories (connection and dependence, center and periphery, cause and effect) were often overwhelmed by an atmosphere of dominance that threatened to bring the entire nation under its control. For Cobbett as for most radical critics, the most alarming evidence of a new expansion of "Old Corruption" was to be found in the wartime growth of patronage and taxation, and in a consequent set of domestic encroachments that were more sinister than any foreign empire.(10) "There is scarcely a family above the rank of day-labourers," he complained, "who is not, in some way or other, interested in the continuation of war" (*Register* 24 [1813], 615). As the defeat of Napoleon came to seem inevitable, and British corruption prepared to extend its dominance across the Continent, Cobbett's outlook grew more desperate. America, "the *last remaining republic*" (*Register* 28 [1815], 1), became the one global space

left free of corruption, while England succumbed to a militant social order that "rendered the views, the feelings, the customs, nay the very fashions, of the people, completely warlike":

> Every thing receives its tone from the events of the war; the influence of its occurrences, is not merely exemplified in our public amusements, but it determines our modes of dress; it regulates our domestic habits. It is not confined to the Exchange, to the coffee-house, to the tavern, or to the beer-house, but it forms the topic of conversation at all our meals, and is peculiarly the theme of the chit-chat of the tea-table . . . Nothing will satisfy, nothing please, nothing gratify, this enterprizing and commercial nation, but perpetual, desolating, barbarous war. (*Register* 25 [1814], 449-50)

The density of absolute terms ("every thing," "not confined," "nothing," "perpetual") was typical of Cobbett's prose in this period, as was the focus on "domestic habits" as an arena of political struggle. Very early in the war, taxation had become a particular grievance with Cobbett, since it allowed the system to multiply "the pretexts of tax-gatherers for intruding into private houses" (*Register* 9 [1806], 865), and to develop a "mode of collection" that opened private spaces to government inspection: "It authorises a set of officers to call you before them; to keep you from day to day dancing attendance upon them; to treat you as a creature at their command" (*Register* 7 [1805], 300-1). Against the *Courier*'s claim that England had become "the last asylum of persecuted liberty," he offered instances of "the *vexations* of the taxing system, as imprinted upon my mind by actual experience, in my own concerns, during the last eight or nine months." By drawing these examples >from his career as an editor as well as a farmer, he extended the process by which radical reformers made "country" idioms of protest available to urban constituencies.(11) As the owner of a farm, Cobbett faced taxes for hiring a day-laborer, for making a cart to send to market, and for keeping a pony for his son; as editor of the *Register*, he required a stamp to draw money upon his publisher, and when the publisher moved his shop, both men were called to the Stamp Office to sign a bond. A system that could enter the private sphere in this way also invaded the interior life of the subject, and became an "evil genius" that followed "one at all times and in all places" (*Register* 10 [1806], 900-903). If this nightmare of corrupt influence seemed to complete the hegemony of system, it also replaced a national "chain of dependence" with immediate, local, and personal terms, offering Cobbett a way out. Returning through his own "actual experience" to the synecdochic analysis of a "single point" of oppression, Cobbett was again able to deploy autobiography as a means of political resistance.(12) Political independence was like corruption located "in the mind," and in personal habits and domestic life, and it was from these arenas that effective political resistance to systematic oppression would have to be launched.

Notes

(1) See *OED*, 1971 ed., s.v. "system." back

(2) There were exceptions, as when he praised "the republican system" in America (*Register* 27 [1815], 170) and "the Napoleon system" that put "personal merit and well-known services" above "the Aristocracy and the Church" (*Register* 23 [1813], 772), and when he recommended for Ireland a "system of emancipation by teaching rational truths" (*Register* 29 [1815], 71). It is worth noting that these positive systems were located far from home: burdened with the Pitt system of finance and its attendant political and social practices, English society had little need of more systematic organization. back

(3) Cobbett's radicalization is normally dated to the period 1806-1808, though Ian Dyck has argued (23-33) that the "agrarian base of his radicalism was taking a distinct shape" as early as 1804; see also Nattrass, 89-118. back

(4) Here as elsewhere Cobbett worked from Paine's description of "the funding system" as a "modern complicated machine" (Paine, 3: 309). back

(5) See Thompson, 189-91, for the machine as a "symbol of social energies which were destroying the very 'course of nature.'" back

(6) Although Williams identified the link between "the ruling-class State and the financial system" as Cobbett's most important and enduring insight (Williams, 73), it was an insight derived from Paine's "Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance," which exposed "a mysterious, suspicious connection, between the minister and the directors of the bank" (Paine, 3: 307). back

(7) For a related scheme to pay laborers on his own farm in kind, see Green, 270. back

(8) For "measures not men," see Brewer, *Party Ideology*, 68-69. back

(9) The "Wen" was Cobbett's term for London, or sometimes for cities generally. back

(10) For Cobbett's role in the critique of an "unholy alliance" of "the ruling oligarchy and the war establishment," see Dickinson, 64-65, 70-71. back

(11) For the paradox of urban enthusiasm for country ideology, see Brewer, "English Radicalism," 330-36. back

(12) For Cobbett's "method of arguing through autobiography," see Nattrass, *William Cobbett*, pp. 90-96. back

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Romanticism and Conspiracy

Paranoid Politics: Shelley and the *Quarterly Review*

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1. "The quarterly is undoubtedly conducted with talent great talent & affords a dreadful preponderance against the cause of improvement. If a band of staunch reformers, resolute yet skilful infidels were united in so close & constant a league as that in which interest & fanatisism [sic] have joined the members of that literary coalition!" In this passage from a letter to Thomas Love Peacock (*Letters* II, 81), Percy Bysshe Shelley recognizes the hegemonic power of the Tory *Quarterly Review*, and suggests that the way to counteract its influence would be to oppose one cabal with another. Elsewhere, in other letters and in his mature poetry, however, Shelley implicitly questions both the worth of conspiratorial activity and the straightforward effectiveness of the printed word. In this paper I will analyze part of the dialogue between Shelley and the *Quarterly Review*, the fiercely reactionary reviewing periodical that he regretfully saw as "conducted" with "great talent." The paper is taken from my book-in-progress, provisionally entitled *Beyond Paranoid Politics: Shelley's Poetry and its Reception*, which attempts to recover Shelley's ethical and aesthetic idealism by identifying the interaction between Shelley's poetry and its early readers as itself an enactment of Shelleyan idealism.(1) In what follows I will begin with some general remarks on the rhetoric of the reviewers, and I will then suggest how the dialogue between Shelley and the *Quarterly* complicates the dynamics of that rhetoric, while in this case remaining within -- as opposed to moving beyond -- paranoid politics.

2. I see the rhetoric of early nineteenth-century reviewers, and the *Quarterly* in particular, as a historically-specific version of the "paranoid style," a totalizing discourse of self-aggrandizement and persecution. I use the phrase "paranoid style" -- taken from Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* -- to characterize not only the violent attacks that Shelley and other poets inspired, but also the vituperative language of the reviewing periodicals in general in early nineteenth-century England. Obsessed with the threat of revolution, users of the paranoid style -- conspiracy theorists by definition -- ascribe to their enemies the ability to effect large-scale social and political change. According to Hofstadter, for the paranoid rhetorician, "History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power" (29).(2) Within the Romantic era version of paranoid politics, both Tory and Whig reviewers translate their intense partisanship into a vocabulary of moral absolutism. Adopting Miltonic and apocalyptic imagery, traditionally exploited by English political rhetoric, these spokesmen for the establishment characterize their adversaries as Satanic rebels against orthodoxy. They tend to pin the blame for actual or potential social unrest on one demonic individual or a small band of conspirators, singling out reformers, including Shelley, for personal attacks and accusing them of corrupting readers. Since in early nineteenth-century England, the publication of reformist texts is a key element in extra-parliamentary political activity, this particular version of the paranoid style involves a preoccupation with the efficacy of the printed word. The establishment reviewers habitually take what Hofstadter calls the "characteristic paranoid leap into fantasy" (11) when describing the influence of reformist texts, whether journalism or poetry. These writers imagine seditious sentiments not only automatically affecting readers, but also magically reaching even the illiterate, by means of contagion. Their belief in an apparently depersonalized contagion conflicts with their belief in the predominance of individual agency, but the paranoid style is not undermined by its

contradictions, it is sustained by them.

3. This extravagant and unstable rhetoric locks the supporters of the Tory government, their Whig antagonists and their shared opponents -- reformers -- into mutually empowering positions. Shelley -- eventually classed as a conspirator in Byron's "Satanic School" -- is excoriated in terms similar to those used against popular radical journalists such as William Cobbett. In what I call the Satanic scenario, reformers embrace the role of defiant rebels, not realizing that in putting the spokesmen for the establishment in the position of God to Milton's Satan, they are allowing them to dictate the terms of public debate. (3) Although it is clearly disabling for reformers, at the same time the Satanic scenario recoils on the Tories, forcing them to give reformers -- including Shelley -- the semblance of power by figuring them as diabolical. Shelley of course could embrace the role of defiant rebel on occasion (notably as the author of *Queen Mab*), and I would suggest that insofar as Shelley's later poems -- including *Prometheus Unbound* and *Adonais* -- antagonize the reviewers, they also take a Satanic position. In my larger project I argue that in dialogue with its reception, Shelley's poetry ultimately sidesteps the assumptions underlying the early nineteenth-century paranoid style. The present paper however restricts itself to an analysis of the interplay between Shelley and the *Quarterly* in terms of the Satanic scenario. First, though, I will briefly address the question of the causes underlying the reviewers' persecutory rhetoric. What motivates this particular outbreak of cultural (as opposed to clinical) paranoia?

4. Why were the reviews so mean? How, that is to say, can we account for what Terry Eagleton, in *The Function of Criticism*, calls the "scurrility" and "sectarian virulence" (37) of the *Quarterly* and the *Edinburgh* Reviews? Eagleton and other materialist critics working on the Romantic period, notably Marjorie Levinson in *Keats's Life of Allegory*, tend to explain the reviewers' excesses with reference to class anxieties; that is to say, they assume that "sectarian virulence" is grounded in something other than political partisanship. By contrast, from a post-Marxist perspective François Furet in his account of conspiracy theory rhetoric in revolutionary France, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, sees politics itself, rather than socioeconomic forces dictating changes in politics, as the new ground. While Furet's inversion of the distinction between base and superstructure may provide a satisfactory explanation for post-revolutionary French conspiracy theory, the English paranoid rhetoric of the same period calls for a more multifaceted account. Lynn Hunt refines Furet's interpretation in her *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*. She points out that the way in which "Furet characterizes revolutionary government as in some sense pathological" preserves the "assumption that the essential characteristics of politics can only be explained by their relation to a social ground. . . . When politics come first, the situation is by definition abnormal" (12). Lynn Hunt instead stresses that political and social determinants are intertwined (13), while also claiming that the "centrality of conspiracy in revolutionary rhetoric cannot be sufficiently explained in historical terms" (42). I would suggest that there are rhetorical as well as historical reasons for the English Romantic-era phenomenon of paranoid rhetoric, and that no single ground for the reviewers' extremism can be identified. Persecution, that is to say, feeds on itself, gathering a self-perpetuating momentum. It is all too easy to see the irrationally defensive tone of the reviewers as a paranoid overreaction to an exclusively political or class-based threat. Impassioned language need not be the result of some hidden (or not so hidden) anxiety: it may invent a threat rather than -- or as well as -- responding to one.

5. Romantic writers' own explanations for what Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria*, called the "damnatory style" of reviewing themselves point to the overdetermined nature of that style in their particular historical moment (238). Hazlitt, for example, in his various attacks on the *Quarterly Review* and its editor, focuses on political and religious bigotry (William Gifford is a party tool) and, predictably,

personalities (William Gifford is a nasty person). Yet Hazlitt also claims that the reviewers calculatingly engage in "assassination" to make money (16: 239). In addition, Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria*, points to a quasi-psychological "habit of malignity in the form of mere wantonness" (238). The discrepancy between what Coleridge calls a "habit of malignity" and what Hazlitt calls "cold-blooded mercenary calculation of . . . profits" (16: 239) raises the question of whether the reviewers believe in what they are saying or are self-consciously engaging in vituperation for the sake of financial gain. This distinction however becomes a false one, since persecution can both absorb multiple motivations and generate more of the same, crossing from one frame of reference to another. Motives based on class, politics, marketing considerations, and personal animosity, intersect and become indistinguishable from each other -- as in Shelley's linkage of the terms "interest & fanatisism." In addition, each of these motivations may be subordinated to the impulse to entertain: persecution is fun! Hence the power and pervasiveness of paranoid rhetoric. Fittingly, in view of the paranoid rhetorician's reliance on tropes of contagion, paranoid fictions are themselves contagious. The rest of my paper will argue for a sort of permeability between Shelley and the reviewers: they respond paranoically to him while at the same time ironically anticipating his challenge to their assumptions, and he publically undercuts their paranoid stance while privately embracing the *Quarterly*'s own demonizing rhetoric.

6. The *Quarterly* attacked Shelley three times during his lifetime, in 1818, 1819, and 1821. Shelley responded to the first two of these attacks both publically, in the Preface and text of *Prometheus Unbound*, his major confrontation with the Satanic scenario, and privately, in letters to his publisher, Charles Ollier. Both *Prometheus Unbound* and Shelley's attack on the *Quarterly* reviewers in *Adonais* can be read as at once critiquing and participating in the mutually empowering and mutually circumscribing antagonisms of paranoid rhetoric. In the rest of this paper I will focus on Shelley's most direct engagement with the reviewers' terms, in a passage from Act II of *Prometheus Unbound* and in one of his letters to Ollier.

7. The *Quarterly*'s first attack on Shelley is a digression in a hostile review of Leigh Hunt's *Foliage*.(4) On one level, Shelley is singled out merely because he is a friend of Hunt's, just as Keats is attacked by *Blackwood's Magazine* partly for the same reason. Regardless of the initial impetus for the attacks, from the point of view of the reviewers, Shelley turns out to be the ideal target for persecution. Not only are his political beliefs almost unspeakably objectionable, his life exemplifies the connection between radical opinions, lax moral principles and immoral behavior. Since Shelley is a wicked man, it follows that his poetry is perverted. Before it even reviews his work, the *Quarterly* establishes Shelley's reputation as a figure of diabolical wickedness. However, the reviewers' own extravagant rhetoric ironically anticipates Shelley's own attempts to unsettle the centrality of individual agency. At the same time, as we will see from Shelley's private reaction to the *Quarterly*, these personal attacks teach the poet on the one hand, the impossibility of directly evading the self-perpetuating logic of the Satanic scenario, and, on the other hand, the potential benefit to be gained from the reviewers' efforts to demonize him.

8. The first attack on Shelley by the *Quarterly* is somewhat oblique. Shelley's name is not actually mentioned in the *Quarterly*'s article on Hunt's *Foliage*, most of which takes a dismissive tone towards the "namby-pamby" (327) Hunt. The reviewer's tone, however, becomes suddenly heightened when he refers to Shelley:

> We may be very narrow-minded, but we look upon it still as somewhat dishonourable to have been expelled from a University for the monstrous absurdity of a 'mathematical

demonstration of the non-existence of a God': according to our understandings, it is not proof of a very affectionate heart to break that of a wife by cruelty and infidelity; and if we were told of a man who, placed on a wild rock among the clouds, yet even in that height surrounded by a loftier amphitheatre of spire-like mountains, hanging over a valley of eternal ice and snow, where the roar of mighty waterfalls was at times unheeded from the hollow and more appalling thunder of the deep and unseen avalanche, -- if we were told of a man who, thus witnessing the sublimest assemblage of natural objects, should retire to the cabin near and write [atheos] after his name in the album, we hope our own feeling would be pity rather than disgust. (J. T. Coleridge, "'Foliage,' by Leigh Hunt," 328-9)

But of course it really is disgust. This startlingly energetic description of Shelley in the Swiss Alps builds on a rumor concerning Shelley's inscription in an inn's guest-book. The attack of course depends on the commonplace notion that sublime mountain scenery confirms orthodox Christians in their faith. (5) Yet the aggressively opinionated stance of the reviewer is momentarily suspended by his own rhetorical evocation of a sublime experience. His contemplation of what is to him Shelley's crucial moment of Satanic rebellion unexpectedly produces not an image of supremely audacious individualism but rather something like a distinctively Shelleyan response to the external world. The "man" passively "placed on a wild rock" is already "among the clouds" yet dizzyingly looks up to even higher peaks as one extreme boundary gives way to another. Perceptions slide in and out of focus as the waterfalls and avalanches are intermittently "unheeded" and "unseen." The reason the writer of the passage pulls himself up short towards the end and repeats "if we were told of a man" is that by this point the human being has been eliminated from the picture. The instance of defiance -- the observer's self-description -- comes only after the observer has become absorbed into the landscape from which he is accused of being unnaturally detached. This personal attack at once confirms Shelley's notoriety and undermines the individual identity of the hypothetical "man" who represents him.

9. Shelley read this review in October, 1818, and replied to it in Act II of *Prometheus Unbound*, written early the following year. Timothy Webb has shown that part of a speech of Asia's was provoked by the *Quarterly*'s image of Shelley in the Swiss Alps.(6) Asia's speech ends:

Hark! the rushing snow!
The sun-awakened avalanche! whose mass,
Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there
Flake after flake, in Heaven-defying minds
As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth
Is loosened, and the nations echo round
Shaken to their roots: as do the mountains now.

(Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, II, iii, 36-42)

I would suggest that Asia's image of the avalanche calls into question the oppositional stance that Shelley's reviewers accused him of taking. The phrase "Heaven-defying minds" gives an impression of Satanic defiance, but the passage as a whole represents a far less individualized, less deliberate form of human agency. "There" at the end of the third line refers both back to the avalanche and forward to "minds," giving the avalanche an external as well as an internal location. The phrase "in Heaven-

defying minds" at once qualifies "Flake after flake" and "As thought by thought is piled," unsettling the boundary between the two. The concentration of participles ("rushing," "awakened," "sifted") locates energy in the avalanche as well as in the "Heaven-defying minds," but the passive verbs, "is piled," "Is loosened," avoid ascribing intention or will either to the "minds" or the snow. Instead of the avalanche being anthropomorphized, the social and political revolution to which it is compared takes on the inevitability and unpredictability of a natural phenomenon. Asia's speech implies that change is not the result of individual -- or conspiratorial -- acts of rebellion, but the widespread recognition of an already existing "truth."

10. This passage also calls into question the straightforward notion of cause and effect implied by the reviewers' conspiracy theory rhetoric. The interplay between active and passive verbs and between tenses de-emphasizes the temporal progression implied by "till" and "after." The outcome of the piling up of thoughts: "some great truth/Is loosened," turns out to be less decisive than one might expect: "some great truth" sounds vague, as if whether the truth is beneficial or destructive is irrelevant. The parallel between "Is loosened" and "is piled" suggests that instead of entailing a break with the past, change is on a continuum with the paradoxically unwilled preparation for the change. The "Heaven-defying minds" do not *cause* the revolution, but neither do they merely accompany it. Asia's speech rewrites revolution as an impersonal process which cannot be pinned down to a particular time or place. Rather than simply oppose one image of Satanic defiance with another, then, the passage undoes the notion of defiance as both a stance taken by an individual and as an ongoing purposeful activity taking place over time.

11. Published before that reply by the poet, the *Quarterly*'s first full-length article on Shelley was a very hostile review of *Laon and Cythna* and *The Revolt of Islam*, written, like the review of *Foliage*, by John Taylor Coleridge, although Shelley became obsessed with the idea that it was written by Robert Southey (but I'm not concerned here with personal paranoia). The reviewer begins by suggesting that Shelley's radicalism is so extreme that it can do no harm: "he might almost be mistaken for some artful advocate of civil order and religious institutions" ([J. T. Coleridge], "Shelley's Revolt of Islam," 460). However, towards the end of the article, the reviewer grants Shelley and his poem a power which he had earlier denied. "He has indeed, to the best of his ability, wounded us in the tenderest part. -- As far as in him lay, he has loosened the hold of our protecting laws, and sapped the principles of our venerable polity; he has invaded the purity and chilled the unsuspecting ardour of our fireside intimacies" (469). The poem itself has performed these quasi-sexual assaults on society and domesticity, but the reviewer goes on to imagine Shelley, by extension, as the possessor of monstrous vanity, "desperate malignity," and "a proud and rebel mind" (471). He then predicts Shelley's death by drowning.

> Like the Egyptian of old, the wheels of his chariot are broken, the path of 'mighty waters' closes in upon him behind, and a still deepening ocean is before him: -- for a short time, are seen his impotent struggles against a resistless power, his blasphemous execrations are heard, his despair but poorly assumes the tone of triumph and defiance, and he calls ineffectually on others to follow him to the same ruin -- finally, he sinks 'like lead' to the bottom, and is forgotten. (471)

After associating Shelley with the sublime in the article on *Foliage*, the same reviewer here connects him with a potentially sublime though also melodramatic scene from Exodus. This passage is unstable, not so much because its language is hyperbolic but because its imagery and syntax work against each

other. The initial Biblical metaphor is disconcertingly concrete: Shelley himself particularly enjoyed the broken chariot wheels, referring to the image in a letter to Ollier as "comical" (*Letters* II, 163). At the same time, the *Quarterly*'s attack makes the poet the pretext for an abstract moral fable representing the fate of all blaspheming sinners. As such, Shelley the individual is incidental to the reviewer's narrative, which might be why he is described with a surprising lack of agency. The sentence's ostensible subject is Shelley, but it begins without attaching the opening comparison to a main clause. Shelley suddenly becomes "him," pursued by the "waters." The passive verbs "are seen," "are heard," confirm the futility of Shelley's "struggles" but they also make him elusive, especially since one next finds that he has been metonymically reduced to "despair." When Shelley finally emerges as the subject of the sentence it is only because by then he is on the point of being submerged in the "ocean." The final image of sinking attempts to dispose of Shelley, but despite the Biblical allusion it leaves the reader with such an impression of bathos that it undercuts its own containment of the already rather ludicrous Satanic figure.

12. Shelley's private response to this passage, in a letter to Ollier dated October 15, 1819, is suggestive:

> I was amused, too, with the finale; it is like the end of the first act of an opera, when that tremendous concordant discord sets up from the orchestra, and everybody talks and sings at once. It describes the result of my battle with their Omnipotent God; his pulling me under the sea by the hair of my head, like Pharaoh; my calling out like the devil who was *game* to the last; swearing and cursing in all comic and horrid oaths, like a French postillion on Mount Cenis; entreating everybody to drown themselves; pretending not to be drowned myself when I *am* drowned; and, lastly, *being* drowned. (*Letters* II, 128)(7)

Shelley imaginatively embellishes the scene conjured up by the *Quarterly*, filling it with activity. For the reviewer's solemn description of an encounter with death, he substitutes a noisy, crowded spectacle. In a rapid succession of lively similes, he translates the reviewer's insinuations into a humorous "battle" between himself and a personally vindictive God who physically drags him beneath the waves. The poet who is so passive in the reviewer's account becomes an energetic "devil" who instead of persuading "others" to be damned, politely entreats "everybody" literally to "drown themselves." Shelley's added detail, "pretending not to be drowned myself when I *am* drowned," transfers agency to himself at the moment of complete loss of control. His willful misreading of the passage in the *Quarterly* shows him eagerly accepting a Satanic stance: the fact that Shelley embraces this picture of himself as the devil implies an appreciation of the limited but lively power to be gained by Satanic defiance. Drawing with his reviewer on a shared discourse of paranoia that floats free of any single ground, Shelley implicitly (though not necessarily consciously) recognizes the appeal of working within the system. At the same time, the reviewer's uneasiness with that system oddly anticipates Shelley's own later poetic attempts to evade it, confirming that those most resistant to Shelley can thus be seen as collaborating with his challenge to the premises underlying paranoid rhetoric.

Notes

(1) The first half of this paper refines the claims of my earlier article, "Paranoid Politics: The *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh* Reviews." back

(2) Hofstadter adds, "Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He is a free, active, demonic agent. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way" (32). back

(3) My sense of the relationship between God and Satan takes for granted what Marjorie Levinson calls "the lesson we first learned from the Romantics. Namely, that Satan is always God's product, structural complement, and support-system" (41). That is to say, the stance of a defiant rebel tends to uphold the orthodoxy that it purports to challenge, as Shelley powerfully dramatizes in *Prometheus Unbound*. back

(4) The author of this review is thought to be John Taylor Coleridge because he refers in a footnote to having known Shelley at Eton (see Reiman, *Romantics Reviewed* 758). In the same footnote J. T. Coleridge refers to a poem which he does not name but which is evidently *Laon and Cythna*. He reviewed this poem in the *Quarterly* for April, 1819 (see below), though at this point wonders "whether it would be morally right to lend it notoriety by any comments" ([J. T. Coleridge], "'Foliage,' by Leigh Hunt," 327). He also claims to "know the author's disgraceful and flagitious history well" (327). back

(5) Cf. Frances Ferguson's reading of "Mont Blanc" (1816). Ferguson claims that Shelley "does not destroy the mountain's symbolic value but merely inverts it" (203), given that "the sublime [is] the aesthetic operation through which one makes an implicit argument for the transcendent existence of man" (213). back

(6) Webb deciphered Shelley's notation on the draft MS. copy of this passage: "This was suggested by the [*Quarterly Review*]" (13). back

(7) The word "*am*" in "*am* drowned" is missing from the manuscript of this letter as transcribed in *Shelley and his Circle* (Reiman, 6: 926-927). back

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Romanticism and Conspiracy

Periodical Indigestion: Hazlitt's Unpalatable Politics

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1. Reviewing Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* for *The Edinburgh Review* in 1816, Hazlitt singles out for attention Coleridge's pointedly un-Miltonic denunciation of "promiscuous" reading:

   > For among other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a READING PUBLIC..., whose heads and hearts are dieted at the two public *ordinaries* of Literature, the circulating libraries and the periodical press. But what is the result? Does the inward man thrive on this regime? Alas! if the average health of the consumers may be judged by the articles of largest consumption; if the secretions may be conjectured from the ingredients of the dishes that are found best suited to their palates; from all that I have seen, either of the banquet or the guests, I shall utter my *Profaccia* with a desponding sigh. (Hazlitt, 16: 105; Coleridge 36-8)

   Is it possible, Hazlitt quickly asks, to be serious after such a "delicate *morceau*"? No, indeed not. But that needn't preclude us from savouring just what makes Coleridge's little "*morceau*" so delicious for our consideration of Hazlitt's periodical criticism. First there is Hazlitt's own status as, arguably, the oddest bur, the relentless critic of the Lake poets' apostasies, whose writings for the periodical press at precisely this time continue to create the taste according to which Coleridge and Wordsworth are being and will be read. Then there is question of the health of this taste. As Coleridge implies, the ordinary reader who diets at the *prix-fixe* banquet that is the periodical press cannot aspire to anything more than a delicate health, due to the consumptive ingredients with which those popular articles are concocted (by Hazlitt and others) for his ordinary palate.

2. However *piquante* such a reading of Coleridge's overcooked metaphor may be, it serves to draw our attention to an alimentary trope (the periodical press as an "ordinary," or *table d'hôte*, for unsophisticated palates) that in turn informs Hazlitt's own *dégustation* of the state of public taste in an 1823 essay, "The Periodical Press" (16: 211-39). Hazlitt is concerned here to rescue the reading public from such high-cultural scorn as Coleridge's; yet, at the same time, he doesn't hesitate to take issue with its distempered appetite, chiding it for indulging the partisan excesses of the Ministerial Press. As so often in his criticism, Hazlitt's political populism regularly collides here with his strikingly individual account of the power of language and of the literary imagination. In characteristic Hazlittian fashion, a levelling argument (in this case, in favour of universal critical suffrage) somehow manages both to celebrate and to deride the public it would defend: no sooner will Hazlitt assert the necessity of courting the reading public if critics are successfully to disseminate the principles of taste (16: 219), than he will concede that this same public's taste is in fact so "ordinary" -- indeed, provincial -- that "it is necessary to insert politics in a sort of sandwich of literature, in order to make them at all palatable" (16: 220).

3. Throughout Hazlitt's consideration of the politics of periodical criticism, metaphors of taste operate

both gastronomically and in terms of a decorum that is both literary and political -- a crossing which can be read most succinctly in the anagrammatic construction of "taste" as "state." Indeed, both Hazlitt's account here and his routine practice of periodical criticism may be profitably considered as a continual negotiation between the state-of-taste and the taste-of-the-state. In dressing politics in a "sandwich of literature" to slip it past the ordinary tastes of the reading public, Hazlitt must simultaneously disguise his (radical) politics as *belles-lettres* if he is to evade the "literary police," those skulking government critics such as William Gifford who, in their critical capacity as tasters to the state, would restrict public taste to a strictly "legitimate" diet. As figured, then, in the metaphorical border crossings performed by "taste" in Hazlitt's account of the periodical press, "politics" denotes not merely an ideological critique of the abuses of power, but also (and more importantly) the manoeuvres of smuggling "politics" past the literary police and into an otherwise unassuming sandwich of literature -- all in the name of creating a more "liberal taste."(1) For romantic criticism, it would appear, political writing has become a matter of undercover gourmandizing.

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4. Hazlitt's lengthy essay consists of three parts: a defense of periodical criticism as necessary to the "critical" spirit of the times if we are to taste, let alone savour, an otherwise "undigested heap" of works of genius; a sampling of some of the more prominent daily, weekly, and monthly offerings of the press, presented thoughout as a banquet whose dishes are to be estimated according to the relative liberality of their editors' tastes; and a denunciation of the illiberal excesses of the Ministerial Press, that "corps of government-critics" (10: 246) who exploit the most servile pretexts to withhold opposition delicacies, practicing political proscription under the heading of literary criticism (8: 221).(2)

5. Opening with the query, "Whether Periodical Criticism is ... beneficial to the cause of literature" (16: 211), Hazlitt quickly overrides the implied charge that the periodical press is not, that it instills fear in contemporary writers and thus inhibits the productions of genius, in order to announce his own truism on the subject -- namely "That periodical criticism is favourable--to periodical criticism" (16: 212). According to Hazlitt, such criticism not only suits the spirit of the times but in fact actually advances it:

> We complain that this is a Critical age; and that no great works of Genius appear, because so much is said and written about them; while we ought to reverse the argument, and say, that it is because so many works of genius *have appeared*, that they have left us little or nothing to do, but to think and talk about them--that if we did not do that, we should do nothing so good. (16: 212)

"Be it so," Hazlitt then announces with an Iago-like flourish, for "'We are nothing, if not critical'" (16: 213). What, precisely, does Hazlitt mean here by "criticism" and why is it so important? In the most straightforward sense (similar to arguments made at greater length by Peacock and others), "criticism" is simply the work of any period subsequent to one of unusual productivity; "criticism" names the study and diffusion of the productions of genius. For Hazlitt, it is this and more. "Criticism," specifically periodical criticism, is the definitive genre of romantic writing, for it is here more than anywhere else that we can read the volatile redefinition of such terms as "literature," "aesthetics," "politics," "taste," and, above all, "criticism," the abiding congery of which terms has in turn produced our valorization of this writing as "Romantic." The challenge for periodical criticism, as Hazlitt presents it, is to reconfigure their relations in a palatable mix, one that will "go down" with the reading public and thus diffuse the ingredients of a liberal (as opposed to a "legitimate," and thereby illegitimate) taste.

6. Having amassed a "superabundance of raw materials," Hazlitt continues, the "grand *desideratum*" of the present is to re-fashion and re-distribute them; since literature is no longer confined to the few, "the object therefore is, to make it accessible and attractive to the many" (16: 219-20). The reading public is no longer to be treated with Coleridgean contempt but, rather, cultivated, flirted with, and seduced into taste. Essential to the success of this appeal is the critical re-fashioning of literature as a coquette. Literature may formerly have been "a sweet Heremitress, who fed on the pure breath of Fame, in silence and in solitude," but modern literature, that delicious *morceau*" is

> ...a gay Coquette, fluttering, fickle, vain; ... the subject of polite conversation; the darling of private parties; the go-between in politics; the directress of fashion; the polisher of manners ... [whose] very variety and superficial polish show the extent and height to which knowledge has been acquired, and the general interest taken in letters. (16: 219)

Similarly directing fashion, polishing manners, and interfering in politics, the operations of the periodical press are distinctly coquettish. Hazlitt even goes so far as to model the contemporary critic on the coquette, announcing that since "we exist in the bustle of the world, and cannot escape from the notice of our contemporaries..., [w]e must please to live, and therefore should live to please. We must look to the public for support" (16: 220). Impudent, witty, bold, and as vulnerable as coquettes, critics rely upon their extraordinary forwardness, their disregard of forms and decorum, to appeal to the vanity of their readers.(3) The success of periodical criticism attends upon its ability to smile and be polite, under cover of which facetious attentions the truly radical critic can essay to smuggle in "politics" past the coquetted gatekeepers.

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7. No sooner has Hazlitt concluded his impudent assessment of the practical versatility of the periodical press than he brings us up short with the "one fatal objection" that is routinely made against periodical criticism -- namely, "that it is too often made the engine of party-spirit and personal invective" (16: 220). Criticism's decidedly coquettish facility as a "go-between" not only makes it invaluable for the dissemination of taste, but also, it now appears, renders it unusually vulnerable to seduction and appropriation. Though this is an abuse greatly to be lamented, Hazlitt immediately attempts to recuperate the value of the periodical press through contending that, in fact, its exploitation "only shows the extent and importance of this branch of literature, so that it has become the organ of everything else" (16: 220).

8. Acutely aware as he is of the Janus-faced versatility of criticism (its facility for seduction coupled with its susceptibility to exploitation), Hazlitt re-formulates this dilemma again and again throughout his appraisal of the periodical press. And each time he does so, we can glimpse the constitutive versatility of Hazlitt's own critical posture, that of a political leveller who is nevertheless a defiant cultural highbrow. Although Hazlitt appears to have taken upon himself the task of vindicating the reading public against Coleridge's censorious ridicule, his defense of miscellaneous criticism often amounts to little more than a melancholic acknowledgement of its necessarily miscellaneous character:

> ...by the progress of cultivation, different arts and exercises stretch out their arms to impede, not to assist one another. Politics blend with poetry, painting with literature; fashion and elegance must be combined with learning and study: and thus the mind gets a

> smattering of everything, and a mastery in none. The mixing of acquirements, like the *mixing of liquors*, is no doubt a bad thing, and *muddles* the brain; but in a certain stage of society, it is in some degree unavoidable. (16: 216)

Similarly, the mixing of genres can be seen to muddle the taste. Through blending poetry and politics, for example, periodical criticism may give the public a *soupçon* of both, but it risks neutralizing its taste for either, for the result (as Hazlitt complains of the *London Magazine*) is that "all is in a confused, unconcocted state, like the materials of a rich plum-pudding before it has been well boiled" (16: 232). The public may indeed "like to taste works in the sample, before they swallow them whole" (16: 231-2), but how is criticism to cultivate a liberal public taste when the public's unsophisticated palate is catered to so indiscriminately?

9. Hazlitt's metaphors of muddled concoctions are noteworthy not only because they clarify the susceptibility of the public to the careless mixing of discreet tastes, but also because, in regulating the entire essay as they do, they comment succinctly on that aspect of Hazlitt's style to which contemporary critics and readers alike take exception: the indiscriminate violation of *belles- lettres* by politics. Keeping in mind that unconcocted state of taste, I want to explicate Hazlitt's richest articulation of this double-standard, as he presents it in "The Periodical Press," in order that we may examine Hazlitt's reservations about periodical criticism in terms of what they reveal, in turn, about the vehement strictures passed by romantic criticism against Hazlitt's own writing.

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10. Having fashioned periodical criticism as a coquette capable of directing manners as well as mediating between (or interfering in) poetry and politics, Hazlitt returns to his alimentary trope in one last, sustained attempt to explain why it is "in some degree" unavoidable that literature and politics are repeatedly to be found concocted (ripened, digested, endured) with one another in romantic criticism:

> The bias to miscellaneous criticism and discussion is so great, that it is necessary to insert politics in a sort of sandwich of literature, in order to make them at all palatable to the ordinary taste. The war of political pamphlets, of virulent pasquinades, has ceased, and the ghosts of Junius and Cato, of Gracchus and Cincinnatus, no longer "squeak and gibber" in our modern streets, or torment the air with a hubbub of hoarse noises. A Whig or Tory *tirade* on a political question, the abuse of a public character, now stands side by side in a fashionable Review, with a disquisition on ancient coins, or is introduced right in the middle of an analysis of the principles of taste. This is a violation, no doubt, of the rules of decorum and order, and might well be dispensed with: but ... mere politics, mere personal altercation, will not go down without an infusion of the Belles-Lettres and the Fine Arts. This makes decidedly either for the refinement or the frivolity of our taste. It is found necessary to poison or to sour the public mind, by going to the well-head of polite literature and periodical criticism, -- which shows plainly how many drink at that fountain, and will drink at no other. (16: 220-21)

Integral to what makes this quotation so startling is that although Hazlitt ostensibly offers us the "sandwich of literature" as a metaphor for the fatal objection against periodical criticism (its appropriation as an "engine of party-spirit and personal invective" [16: 220]), it is after all such an apt figure for (if not, furthermore, a lampoon of) the operations of his own writing. Far from being merely guilty of such sleight-of-hand, Hazlitt's criticism stands and falls according to this criterion.

11. When Hazlitt first deploys the word "taste," he does so gastronomically, with regard to the public's palate. When he next does so, it figures decorum (the "principles of taste") yet not without an aftertaste of its previous usage: what is a reader to do, Hazlitt implicitly asks, when he finds a political tirade "right in the middle of an analysis [a sandwich] of the principles of taste"? Such unpredictable interventions lend an unexpected degree of urgency to Hazlitt's conclusion, when (having noted again that "mere politics ... will not go down without an infusion of the Belles-Lettres"), he announces, "this makes decidedly either for the refinement or the frivolity of our taste." "This" is what is finally at stake for Hazlitt in periodical criticism: will such sandwiches enhance the taste of the public, rendering it more liberal? Or will they corrupt and poison it, reducing it to an illiberal distemper?

12. A preliminary answer may be read, once again, in Hazlitt's figure of the critic-as-coquette, whose impudent versatility qualifies him to direct fashions, yet renders him vulnerable to appropriation and redirection by party politics. As Hazlitt proceeds to sample the offerings of the periodical press, the criterion that emerges is the correspondence between editorial taste and the "liberal taste" which Hazlitt holds to be "the true characteristic of the age" (16: 232): while the editor of the *London Magazine* occasionally fails to bring his pudding to a boil, leaving things in a "confused, unconcocted state," the editor of the *New Monthly* errs in the other direction, tampering until "the taste and spirit evaporate" (16: 232).

13. The failing of most periodicals, however, is not over-refinement but coarseness and profanity. "The illiberality of the Periodical Press," Hazlitt clarifies, "is 'the sin that most easily besets it,'" though it is only "the worst part of the Ministerial Press that has had the temptation, the hardihood, or the cowardice to make literature the mere tool and creature of party-spirit" (16: 232-3). With this turn to the Ministerial Press, Hazlitt devotes the remainder of the article to exposing and denouncing "the great opprobium of our periodical literature": that a malignant "gang of literary retainers" in the service of the "literary police" should defame as wickedly as they do all writers who do not "have the Government mark upon them," thereby polluting not merely the periodical press but also the taste of a reading public that relies upon it for its critical diet (16: 237, 238, 239). Scrutinizing in this way the illiberal excesses which compromise the otherwise miscellaneous character of the periodical press, Hazlitt vociferously exposes the ideological distortions according to which the Ministerial Press would disease the reading public with its "legitimate taste." In the same breath as he denounces these "government scribblers" and "court critics," Hazlitt also manages to remind us that "the continuance of this nuisance rests ... with the public" (16: 233), and is not likely to cease until "the excess leads to the remedy, and the distempered appetite of the public be surfeited, and so die" (16: 239).

* *

14. While it is curiously reminiscent of Coleridge's desponding *profaccia*, Hazlitt's double-pronged disdain here (both for the press and the public) needs to be considered within the context of his own relations with the press, both ministerial and otherwise, if we are to understand why contemporary critics found his own politics so unpalatable. How is it that, formulating as well as he does the necessity of smuggling politics into a sandwich of literature if they are to have any chance of going down with the reading public, his own writing sticks so uncomfortably in the throat of so many of his own readers and reviewers?

15. An appraisal of Hazlitt's style by Thomas Noon Talfourd (a middlebrow defender of the "ordinary taste") may be taken as representative. In a lengthy review of Hazlitt's *Lectures Chiefly on Dramatic Literature* (1820) for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820, Talfourd writes that Hazlitt's "love of startling paradox -- and his intrusion of political virulence, at seasons when the mind is prepared only for the delicate investigations of taste, have naturally provoked a good deal of asperity, and prevented the due appreciation of his powers" (438).(4) Startling as well as virulent, Hazlitt's writing offends the reader both rhetorically (too paradoxical) and politically (too vehement). According to Talfourd, literary criticism is a venue and an inquiry which "should be sacred from all discordant emotions" (441) in order for the reader better to appreciate "those talents and feelings which [Hazlitt] has here brought to the contemplation of such beauty and grandeur, [which] none of the low passions of this 'ignorant present time' should ever be permitted to overcloud" (438-9). In violating both the decorum of genre and the sensibilities of his audience, Talfourd complains, Hazlitt fatally impedes his own appreciation. If Hazlitt has not met with critical justice, according to Talfourd, then it must finally be attributed to his apparent readiness to indulge not merely the "occasional breaking in of personal animosities on that deep harmony which should attend the reverent contemplation of genius" (439), but also the most arresting figurative language, which latter propensity produces "the want of all continuity in his style" (440). Take, for example, the "sandwich of literature": as a critic, Hazlitt clearly understands the necessity of disguising politics in such a way as not to aggravate the reader's taste; but when it is a matter of his own writing, he is incapable of exercising such restraint. As Talfourd implicitly recognizes but hesitates to accede to, the intersection of politics and literature in Hazlitt's writing can in no way be confined to that writing which presents itself as overtly "political."

16. Indeed, although contemporary reviewers repeatedly criticize Hazlitt for the intrusion of political invective upon what is supposed to be tasteful literary criticism, any attempt to distinguish, once-and-for-all, political from literary writing in Hazlitt is bound to fail. An anonymous review of Hazlitt's *Political Essays* (1819) in the *Monthly Review* (1820) further reveals the critical ambivalence with which Hazlitt's writing was received, and the sharp discontinuity reviewers regularly remarked between his political and literary criticism. Qualifying as "extra-judicial" his attention to a volume that merely collects articles which have already appeared in the newspapers (primarily in the *Examiner*), the reviewer remarks that, if he is in fact tempted to read the *Political Essays*, to "stray from the turn-pike road of professional duty and wander with [Hazlitt] wheresoever he invites us," it is quite specifically due to the "ardent and unstudied eloquence, the fertile fancy, the quick sensibility, and the discriminating genius, which Mr. Hazlitt has displayed" in the*Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817), the *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), and the *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819).

17. In moving from literary criticism to politics, however, and there confining himself "almost exclusively to the vituperation of political characters" (252), the Hazlitt of the *Political Essays* receives no such approbation:

    > An irrepressible vehemence pervades the language of Mr. Hazlitt, which, when applied to *persons*, even in their political capacity as statesmen, orators, or writers, is calculated to alienate and irritate.... His criticisms of our dramatic and poetic writers are delightful; evincing a perception and enjoyment of those minor beauties and almost latent graces of composition, which are lost on the dull organs of common observers. We had much rather, therefore, see him exercising his faculties on the *belles lettres* than on politics: -- he has not temper enough for the latter. (255-6)

    In privileging Hazlitt's "critical rather than his political lucubrations," the reviewer repeatedly attends not simply to the falling off of Hazlitt's critical perception and reasoning with regard to politics but,

conspicuously, to the efficacy and temper of Hazlitt's language in the *Political Essays*, where the "indulgence of invective" distinguishes it from other less topical political writing. If literary criticism is to be distinguished by its quick and responsive sensibility, then, for the *Monthly*'s reviewer, political writing is to be marked by reasoning, rather than invective, which not only obscures Hazlitt's significant critical prowess, but further indicts him as a sort of rhetorical tyrant:

> We participate with him in all his hatred of tyranny and contempt for its tools, whatever station in life they occupy, and with whatever rank or title they are decorated and disgraced, but we have no relish for diffuse, personal, and declamatory invective, and of this we have too much in the volume before us. The writer's command of language is very great, and he is sometimes apt to exercise his imperial power like other potentates, uncontrouled by judgement or discretion. (258)

As sympathetic as this reviewer is to Hazlitt's agenda in the *Political Essays*-- "I cannot sit quietly down under the claims of barefaced power, and I have tried to expose the little arts of sophistry by which they are defended" (7: 7) -- he is nonetheless quick to comment wryly on the degree to which Hazlitt's rhetorical practice of vehement and splenetic invective is but a "tool" of the tyranny to which he succumbs in his political writing, which turns ardent, impatient political integrity into linguistic despotism.(5)

18. Hazlitt, then, would seem simultaneously to command language and, thanks to to his intemperance, to lose his command over language; it is precisely this undiscriminating contradiction that lessens the critic's "relish," or taste, for Hazlitt's writing. (As attentive to the seemingly inevitable alignment of language, the imagination, and power as he is in his repeated criticisms of apostates and apostasy for abstracting the sense of power from the sense of good, Hazlitt himself can be seen, again and again, to fall prey to a similar overdetermination of language by an intemperate imagination.) Or, worse still, Hazlitt can be said to abdicate his critical "command" through catering to the reading public's distempered "organs" of taste:

> The taste of the public has, of late years, been accustomed to very high stimulants: no plain wholesome food will go down; and every thing must be hashed and stewed with some "*sauce piquante*," which however delicious to one palate, may be very offensive and disgusting to another. Mr. Hazlitt should not cater for such pampered appetites. (256)

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19. The intensely *piquante* collision of the political with the literary in Hazlitt's own writing marks it as dangerously critical for a periodical press that is (most prominently between Waterloo and Peterloo) singularly preoccupied with the relation between romantic politics and romantic writing, a relation characterized by an aestheticization of politics that is as uncontrollable as it is unavoidable. While a reviewer as sympathetic as Talfourd marginalizes Hazlitt's splenetic invective by insisting on the status of criticism as *belles-lettres*, Gifford condemns Hazlitt's writing as seditious libel in order to discredit his increasingly celebrated status as a literary critic.(6) Regardless of the partisan politics of the reviewer, Hazlitt's intemperate writing inevitably provokes a display of the critical and ideological anxieties which characterize romantic criticism (including Hazlitt's own). Motivated at either extreme by the seeming necessity of defending literature, literary criticism, and the periodical press against Hazlitt's saucy reading practices, romantic criticism is repeatedly forced to confront the disturbing possibility that Hazlitt's politics not only brand every aspect of his writing, but also empower its

> resistance to any and all principles of literary taste and decorum, including that law of genre according to which literary criticism is not to be contaminated by politics--unless, of course, it is disguised in a "sandwich of literature."

Notes

(1) See Hazlitt's *Letter to William Gifford* (1819; 9: 11-59), for Hazlitt's most sustained denunciation of Gifford, the "*Government Critic* ... the invisible link that connects literature and the police" (9: 13), whose servile role as editor of the *Quarterly Review* is to counteract any knowledge of the English language and its literature "except on the minister's side of the question," in order to "restore the taste of the public to its legitimate tone" (9: 33). back

(2) In "On Criticism" (included in the 1821 edition of *Table-Talk*), Hazlitt clarifies that the basis of what he derides as "political criticism" is first-and-foremost the "virulence of party spirit," for "the basis of this style of writing is a *caput mortuum* of impotent spite and dulness, till it is varnished over with the slime of servility, and thrown into a state of unnatural activity by the venom of the most rancorous bigotry" (10: 220). Hazlitt continues, in a voice reminiscent of his contemptuous denunciation of Gifford two years earlier:

> It is not a question of literary discussion, but of political proscription. It is a mark of loyalty and patriotism to extend no quarter to those of the opposite party. Instead of replying to your arguments, they call you names, put words and opinions into your mouth which you have never uttered, and consider it a species of misprision of treason to admit that a Whig author knows any thing of common sense or English. (10.221) back

(3) Intriguingly, although Hazlitt feminizes criticism as a "coquette," in *Liber Amoris* (which he had submitted for publication the same year he undertook to write "The Periodical Press"), Hazlitt insistently characterizes Sarah Walker as a "coquet," a masculine usage that was ostensibly obsolete by the end of the eighteenth century. back

(4) See Talfourd's "Thoughts Upon the Intellectual Character of the Late William Hazlitt" for a fuller exposition of Talfourd's reservations. back

(5) To the degree that Hazlitt's rhetorical tyranny not only compromises his otherwise rigorously libertarian politics, but also renders him susceptible to appropriation by his Tory foes, the Hazlitt indicted here by the *Monthly Review*'s critic uncomfortably resembles the Shelley whom Hazlitt will indict in "On Paradox and Common-Place" (8: 146-52) for the political dangers of his own rhetorical excesses. back

(6)Reviewing *The Characters of Shakespear's Play's* in the *Quarterly Review*, Gifford seizes upon Hazlitt's politicization of the plays in order to expose "how very small a portion of talent and literature is necessary to carry on the trade of sedition" (466). Justifying his splenetic bardolatry as a necessary exposition of the libellous and "concentrated venom" of Hazlitt's "malignity," Gifford would convict Hazlitt according to the "law" of the *Quarterly* (espoused by Southey in "Parliamentary Reform" and "The Rise and Progress of Popular Disaffection"), according to which seditious libel is to be made punishable by transportation. (Although Gifford's review ran anonymously, Hazlitt's supposition regarding its authorship is supported by, among others, Hill Shine, in *The* Quarterly Review *Under Gifford* [60].) back

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Romanticism and Conspiracy

Bringing About the Past: Prophetic Memory in Kant, Godwin, and Blake[(1)]

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

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

methodological and conceptual agonies of the historicist critic martyred by the opacity of that aesthetic tradition. After all, it takes a heroic effort to reclaim the past by sustaining critical dissent from the symptomatic aesthetic surfaces deemed to have "conspired" so lastingly against a more authentic understanding of that past.

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

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

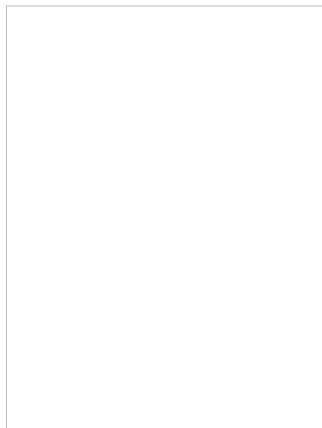
4. In the view of the Historicist tradition originating in Spinoza, and extending via Herder, Ernesti, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer to the New Historicists today, any unqualified textualism amounted to a conspiracy (consciously or unconsciously) against the political and economic significations transmitted by that text, however unconsciously. The ideal of strictly immanent reading merely dignified the critic's apparent failure to search for, detect, and respond to the oblique social determinacy of the aesthetic in general, and the deeply encrypted referential activity of the Romantic text in particular. While opposing the New Critical paradigm of reading as a technique for recovering eschatological structures in vernacular and prosodic forms -- thereby contributing, in T. S. Eliot's formulation, to "the organization of values and [the] direction of religious thought" (4) -- contemporary New Historicism appears energized by utopian hopes of equal intensity. Characterized in memorably Schlegelian terms by Jerome McGann as "the completed form of criticism" (1983, 56), this approach produces knowledge in the form of two, closely intertwined (liberal) utopias: that of a steadily advancing, "deeply-interpretive" and, eventually, all-encompassing contextualism and (my focus for today) the fantasy of retroactively liberating the aesthetic object from the "visible darkness" (to use Marjorie Levinson's Miltonic and Blakean phrase) of its own referential obfuscations.(2) Predicated on a set of heavily revised Marxist and psychoanalytic concepts, Historicist reading conceives of literature as an intuitive or unconscious knowledge that, being unbearable in direct propositional form, had to be encrypted in aesthetic forms specifically available at its historical moment, such as the affective concision of the lyric or in the inward vagaries of autobiographical narrative.

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

6. My first case in point involves the ambiguous temporal logic prevailing in Blake's early prophecies, books whose commitment to "illumination" is informed by the alleged spiritual and political oppression said to have issued from Albion's "past" and by the writer's hope for a retroactive "correction" or "redemption" of that past from the "ninefold darkness" of priestcraft, tyranny, and reason. Recent historicist work has drawn our attention to the often inextricable lines of division between the eschatological beliefs of London's millennarian, mostly artisan communities during the

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

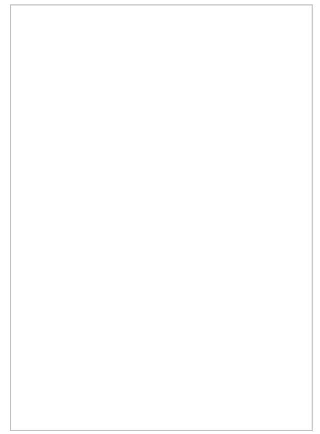
Figure 1: *The Book of Urizen* Copy G, Plate 13



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

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

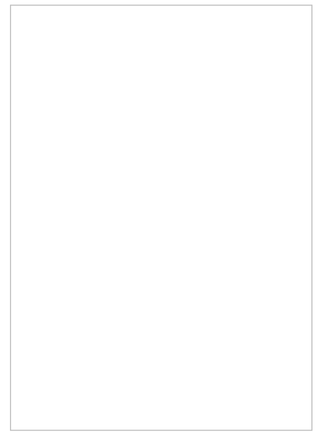
A vast Spine writh'd in torment
Upon the winds; shooting pain'd
Ribs, like a bending cavern
And bones of solidness, froze
Over all his nerves of joy.
And a first Age passed over,
And a state of dismal woe.
(Copy D, Plate 9, lines 37-43)



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

7. And yet, even in a world, like Hamlet's, where the pale cast of thought has seemingly corroded the individual's native hue of resolution, all is not lost; for Blake's idea of the book is itself an attempt to mobilize what Walter Benjamin was to call our "*weak* Messianic power," that is, the materially and spiritually vivid illumination of a catastrophic history which, *from its very beginning and by virtue of that beginning*, has compromised all means for our recovery from it. To grasp that inescapable "nexus of guilty life" (*der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen* -- a phrase defining what Benjamin understood as myth and what we may call ideology -- is to contemplate, actively and imaginatively, a past of which we, our curiosity, and our expressive capabilities are all joint (and irremediably corrupt) effects; Plate 14 in Copy D (16 in Copy G) of Blake's *Book of Urizen* dramatizes that moment:

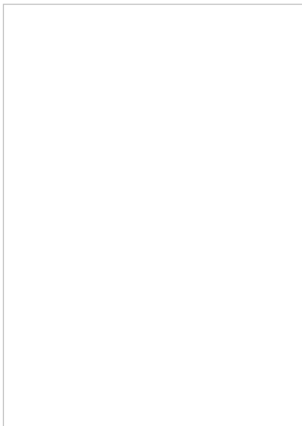
Figure 3: *The Book of Urizen*, Copy G, Plate 16



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

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

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



Blake here again illustrates the primordial crisis (Grk. *krinein* = division) already imaged so luminously on Plate 13. It is the vivid illumination of a mind traumatically divided ("rifted with direful changes") between the vivid, and often oppressive experience of its historical existence -- a quasi-Burkean past choked with the implacable moral law of tradition -- and the anxious and almost certainly doomed quest for techniques capable of rendering that past existence intelligible and thereby ensuring our survival. Appropriately enough, the plate's iconic force -- reminiscent of non-perspectival medieval representations -- grows out of the violent contrast between the "depthless" *Gestalt* of Los trapped "in dreamless night" and his gaze of catastrophic expectation (reinforced by the toothless, semingly disfigured mouth). Specifically his eyes show Los craving nothing so much as perspective and distance on "formless unmeasurable death." Blake's figure, which utterly dominates the plate, strikingly anticipates Walter Benjamin's account of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the "angel of history:" "His eyes are staring, his mouth is open[.] . . . His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm . . . irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (1968, 258). In Blake, as in Benjamin, the image itself offers the most vivid and forceful "perspective" on a conflict or interference

which it also embodies or "illuminates" that between a fantasized, authoritative and conclusive mode of historical cognition and the abject intuition that any intellectual promise of epistemological self-sufficiency inevitably resurrects the nefarious (Urizenic) forces of history from which it was purported to redeem us. The images of Blake, in other words, are anti-classical and, in the best sense of the word, postmodern, for they articulate a purposely oblique (depthless) pathos. That is, they no longer conceive "pathos" as the timeless verity of a self transfigured in the semblance (*Schein*) of the aesthetic; instead, they "illuminate" pathos as the moment of catastrophic recognition that no mere image (or concept, or critical narrative) will *ever* reconstitute the spiritual and cognitive equilibrium whose loss they themselves dramatize with such intensity. Analogously, Benjamin's ninth thesis -- itself but "the written space of a contradiction" -- offers a fleeting glimpse of history as the source of a wholly new kind of pathos, the suffering of a subject "who is denied the image as a place of repose or as an icon blasted out of the past" (Hartman, 77, 78).

8. My second example of the curious affinity between Romantic fictional and disciplinary constructs and what Paul Smith has analyzed as a "kind of 'meta-paranoia' [underlying the] humanist practice" (97) of contemporary historicism, involves Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). Believing himself persecuted by Falkland's "eye of Omniscience" whose unrelenting gaze Caleb's invasive behavior had so artfully courted, Caleb concedes that "my sensations [in London] at certain periods amounted to insanity" (316). The novel's original ending heightens our sense of the plot's undecidability by observing how Falkland's fetishistic attachment to "his reputation" as something to remain "for ever inviolate" curiously "harmonized with the madness of my soul" (339). Precisely this paranoid lucidity prompts Caleb -- terminally imprisoned both by material walls and by his own, unconfessed compulsions -- to embark on writing the very story of his life now available to us as *Caleb Williams*, the novel. Drawing sustenance to the very end from the negative fantasy of his unending persecution and impending destruction, Caleb notes: "I feel now a benumbing heaviness, that I conceive to have something in it more than natural. I have tried again and again to shake it off. I can scarcely hold my pen. Surely -- surely there is no foul play in all this. My mind misgives me. I will send away these papers, while I am yet able to do so" (345). Thus Caleb winds up his account by reinforcing once more the very conspiratorial affect that we encounter in the book's familiar opening paragraph: "My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity. I have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny . . . " (5). And if Caleb the protagonist concludes his tale of woe by furnishing Caleb the narrator with his conspiratorial hypothesis, the latter's first-person voice in turn reproduces a self-confirming logic plotted (once again in advance) by the author himself. Thus Caleb's opening, subtly equivocal assurance that "my story will, at least, *appear* to have that consistency which is seldom attendant but upon truth" (5), echoes Godwin's 1832 account of the composition of *Caleb Williams*: "I felt that I had great advantage in . . . carrying back my invention from the ultimate conclusion to the first commencement of the train of adventures upon which I proposed to employ my pen. An entire unity of plot would be the infallible result; and the unity of spirit and interest in a tale truly considered, gives it a powerful hold on the reader, which can scarcely be generated with equal success in any other way" (349-50). Writing one's own story thus amounts to a compulsive and hermetic game of *fort/da*, an elaborate attempt at reasserting symbolic governance over a reality intuitively grasped as utterly inchoate and in need of symbolic condensation. The novel's tightly wrought plot achieves precisely that control by neatly balancing the negative romance of Caleb's persecution of, and eventually by, Falkland against Caleb's (and Godwin's) narrative enthrallment of their readership. Just as Caleb's decision to set himself "as a watch upon my patron" induces in him "a new state of mind" -- "watchful, inquisitive, suspicious, full of a thousand conjectures as to the meaning of the most indifferent actions" (112-13, 128) -- so Godwin's authorial conduct of "employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive" of his subjects caused him to feel "in a high state of excitement" during the composition of his book (351, 350). In a deceptively straightforward manner, the novel thus develops Caleb's professed innocence and Falkland's alleged corruption as two mutually discrediting

metonymic series, the one compulsive and the other premeditated. Such a design effectively baits the reader's analytic proclivities by hinting regularly at the symptomatic quality of either protagonist's behavior. The conspiracy at issue, then, is not contained in the text but perpetrated by it; for no matter how thorough our interpretive industry, the vigilant logic undergirding *Caleb Williams* will ultimately defy all closure precisely because it had baited the analytic industry meant to produce such closure in the first place. To that end, the novel repeatedly "plants" evidence in the form of countless "mysterious fatalities" and "instantaneous impulse[s]" of character and circumstance, details designed to instill in the reader an (illusory) consciousness of analytic mastery that will eventually be dismantled by the book's political and psychological developments. Recalling, nearly forty years later, his excited state of mind during the composition of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin tells us how he had resolved to"write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader, that no one, after he has read it, shall ever be exactly the same man that he was before" (350).

9. That same, utterly transformative ambition harbored and so defiantly asserted by Godwin and Blake also undergirds Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the last example to be considered here. Again, the stated goal (and the intellectual hypothesis) of the narrative is that it, the text, will constrain the audience to reconceive its cognitive relationship to phenomena ostensibly external to the subject. Kant thus opens his argument not with an outright rejection of the concept of "experience" but with the curious hypothetical statement that "experiential knowledge might quite possibly be already something composite (*ein Zusammengesetztes*) of what we receive by way of intuition and of what is spontaneously furnished by our cognitive faculties (*Erkenntnisvermögen*), an additive (*Zusatz*) that we cannot distinguish from the basic matter [of experiential data] until extended practice has drawn our attention to this circumstance and has schooled us to make discriminations in this manner" (1787 version "B," 1-2; translation mine). In this introductory sentence, Kant offers two, mutually confirming claims: first, that the possibility of knowledge rests on something logically prior to the deceptive primacy of experiential data and, also, prior to our intuitive mechanisms for the reception of such data; and, second, that in order to grasp such a counter-intuitive theory of knowledge, we must effectively abandon all hope for speedy proof and submit to the "extended discipline" (*lange Übung*) of transcendental reflection. Not surprisingly, Kant's *Critique* offers itself as the best or, in any event, the only manual for such mental calisthenics. In other words, he ". . . *constructs* theoretical entities that serve his purpose. There is no empirical confirmation of Kant's hypothesis, however, since what counts as experience, and also as confirmation, is created by our acceptance of that hypothesis" (Rosen, 25).

10. Kant's concept of experience as grounded in an imperceptible synthesis of our intuitive and conceptual powers will yet have to confront its ultimate, repeatedly deferred presupposition: whether to view mind itself strictly as one more *effect* of this synthetic transcendental apparatus or, alternatively, to argue that mind (as "pure self-consciousness") actually governs this synthesis itself *a priori*. Recognizing that his term "transcendental" has been functioning in ways virtually indistinguishable from "hypothetical," Kant calls the question: does mind exercise rational governance over "its" representations (including those of "itself"), or is it merely a contingent and logically belated effect of its own subterranean synthetic activity? Given the apparent impossibility of justifying a project whose internal organization rests on our acceptance of a hypothesis about matters *prior to experience* -- thereby precluding all verification or falsification by experience -- Kant introduces a new type of pre-conscious symbolization in order to ensure both, the self-conscious integrity of the philosophical subject known as "apperception" and the rationality and legitimacy of its representations as knowledge. This symbolic activity is introduced under the name "schematism" and is further characterized as a "product and, as it were, a monogram, of pure *a priori* imagination, through which . . . images themselves first become possible." Posited as the hidden capstone for Kant's analytic edifice, however, this schematism -- troped with such revealing poignancy as a "monogram" -- must perforce remain inscrutable and

indemonstrable.(4) As Kant notes, "in its application to appearances and their mere form, . . . [the schema is] an art concealed in the depth of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to uncover, and to have open to our gaze" (183). Like Blake's Urizen, that cocooned embodiment of Reason, the Kantian schema instances the ultimate presupposition that is philosophy: that of the ceaselessly suspicious yet allegedly "pure" character of thought itself -- a "silent activity / Unseen in tormenting passions; / An activity unknown and horrible; / A self-contemplating shadow / In enormous labours occupied" (Blake, *Book of Urizen*, Plate 3, lines 17-22). In Kant's transcendental theory, then, all justification is necessarily internal, a metonymic chain of hypotheses that, by virtue of their repeated usage as pseudo-explanations, congeal into valid components of what Kant calls "transcendental reflection." Having charged all possible experience with conspiring to claim independence when, in fact, it is utterly incapable of representing itself, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* seeks to remedy the situation by offering its own hypothetical account as a logically viable answer to this conundrum. Kant's answer comes in the form of something he calls "transcendental schematism," a subterranean synthetic activity designed to restore the epistemic coherence of the subject and its world from which Kant's argument, until just now, had taken such pains to estrange us. The kind of conspiratorial hermeneutics here at issue has been described as "a method for begging the question on a grand scale," which is to say, a "method for proving things, independent of empirical appeals, by demonstrating that they are self-evidently presupposed by what is (supposedly) self-evident" (Herrnstein-Smith, 128).

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

12. The remarkable collusion between the cultural output of Romanticism -- in the broader sense of European cultural history as it unfolds between the later eighteenth and the mid- nineteenth century -- and the historicist methods committed to identifying and resolving the enigmas and antagonisms of that

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

Notes

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

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

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

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

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