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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

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About This Volume

This volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* includes an editor's introduction by Forest Pyle, essays by Ian Balfour, David Ferris, Karen Swann, with a response by Marc Redfield.

In spite of the recent prevalence of historical and sociological concerns in Romantic scholarship, the aesthetic insists: indeed, its very mode is one of insistence. The essays by Balfour, Ferris, and Swann collected for this issue address the question of "Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic" by turning in various forms to Romantic versions of the relationship between the aesthetic and power, whether as a form of violence or a force of possibility. In readings that address Kant (Balfour, Ferris) and Shelley (Balfour, Swann, Pyle) and that include discussions of Keats, Wordsworth, and Schiller, these essays demonstrate that to read is not to take refuge from but to subject oneself to the adventures of power and force that are inextricable from the aesthetic. Redfield's response to these essays stresses their emphasis on the predicament of reading—the ways in which they "exemplify the diverse legacy of deconstruction"—and argues for the importance of their intervention in Romantic Studies.

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About the Romantic Circles Praxis Series

The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** is devoted to using computer technologies for the contemporary critical investigation of the languages, cultures, histories, and theories of Romanticism. Tracking the circulation of Romanticism within these interrelated domains of knowledge, **RCPS** recognizes as its conceptual terrain a world where Romanticism has, on the one hand, dissolved as a period and an idea into a plurality of discourses and, on the other, retained a vigorous, recognizable hold on the intellectual and theoretical discussions of today. **RCPS** is committed to mapping out this terrain with the best and most exciting critical writing of contemporary Romanticist scholarship.

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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

Introduction: 'The Power is There': Romanticism as Aesthetic Insistence

Forest Pyle, University of Oregon

Introducing essays by Balfour, Ferris, Swann, and Redfield on the topic of Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic, Pyle argues that the question of power is integral to Romanticism's conception of the aesthetic. These essays insist on the problem of the aesthetic in readings that address Kant (Balfour, Ferris, Redfield) and Shelley (Balfour, Swann, Pyle) and that include discussions of Keats, Wordsworth, and Schiller. This essay appears in *Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic*, a volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, prepared exclusively for Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>), University of Maryland.

1. In the famous "hymn" Shelley addressed to the "Spirit of Beauty," the poet must call out to an absence: if this particular aesthetic spirit is that which "consecrates" with its "own hues all" it "shines upon/ Of human thought or form" (13-14), the whereabouts of the spirit are unknown. "Where art thou gone?," asks the speaker, "Why dost thou pass away and leave our state./ This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?" (15-17). In "our state," this "dim vast vale of tears," we are left only with the effects of the spirit of beauty, precious and "dear" though they are. These effects take the form of likenesses, semblances of the aesthetic spirit which has departed and which pays "visits" to our human world — "each human heart and countenance" — "with inconstant glance" (6,7).
2. One might well invoke Shelley's lament to characterize one consequence of the attention to history and sociology that has governed the state of Romantic studies over the past two decades. Indeed, one might well say that the methodological diversity that has come to distinguish Romanticism and its allied or subsidiary fields is predicated upon "vacating" the aesthetic spirit (or theories or forms or practices) that had delineated Romanticism in the first place. What, then, does it mean to pose the question of the aesthetic — indeed, to *insist* upon it — at a time, as David Ferris puts it in the first of the essays to follow, "when the interpretive pendulum has swung towards increasing textual transparency in the form of an insistence upon historical and sociological concerns as arbiters of literary significance"(1)? When so much of the recent important work on the period has focused on the disparate topics of history, sociology, politics, gender, ecology, and the archive, what does it mean to insist on an insistent relationship between Romanticism and the aesthetic, to declare that the aesthetic itself insists, remains insistent, has never not insisted?
3. If aspects of Shelley's life and work have often been marshaled to support much of the historicizing impulse of contemporary Romantic studies, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" not only speaks of and to the aesthetic, it recounts its deep commitment, and in the process recommits itself, to the "binding" spirit of beauty. As much an elegy as a hymn, the poem mourns the absence of the "awful LOVELINESS" (71) to whom the poet "vowed" to "dedicate" his personal "powers" (61). But it would be more accurate to describe the spirit as transient, fugitive, perpetually impermanent rather than simply absent. After all, the poem identifies "Intellectual Beauty" as the primary and even prime "Power" which, though unavailable to the sense of sight, casts an "awful shadow" that "Floats though unseen amongst us"(1,2). While it is forever elusive as presence — it is nothing that we could point at — Shelley's "spirit of Beauty" is nonetheless a "Power," a force which *insists*.
4. In the three essays collected for this issue, David Ferris, Karen Swann, and Ian Balfour address the question of "Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic" by turning in one form or another to Romantic versions of the relationship between the aesthetic and power, whether as a form of violence

or a force of possibility. These essays demonstrate that far from the being the exclusive property of historicists and sociologists, varieties of power are produced and avail themselves to reading and to critique by Romanticism's own relationship to aesthetics. None of the critics gathered here have construed the topic as the *return* of the aesthetic and certainly not, to cite one important recent anthology, as the *Revenge of the Aesthetic*. To attend to the insistence of the aesthetic is not to offer it as a refuge from the conflicts of politics and history. Indeed, in the German and English examples examined in these essays, the aesthetic does not appear as a form of space—not haven or enclave or utopia—but precisely as an *insistence*, as something that was *nevernotthere*, however obscured, overlooked, or repressed it might have been. Beyond its more recent—and certainly relevant—role in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse as an English translation of *instance*, *insistence* is defined by the OED as the very "action of insisting, the fact of being insistent," "emphatic or urgent dwelling upon a statement, a demand"; and it is closely related to persistence, to something that persists. Webster's offers some minor but suggestive variations by defining *insist* as "to stand or to rest" and *insistence* as "to take a stand and refuse to give way." We are prompted by these definitions to understand insistence as a kind of gnawing annoyance, the tendency of something to keep pointing to itself, to remind us that it is there, that it has never ceased to be there, that it will stay there. At the same time, this quality of aesthetic insistence is contrary to the nature of an aesthetic judgment which presents itself as something singular and instantaneous. And, as the following essays demonstrate, Romanticism's version of the insistence of the aesthetic is distinguished by what is either an antinomy or an aporia between the insistence of the aesthetic and the instantaneousness of judgment. In each of these essays, the aesthetic makes insistent demands on our understanding of Romanticism and it is something that, despite critical efforts to ignore it or render it symptomatic, persists into the present. Each of these essays explores aesthetic insistence not only as a demand but as *action* and *statement*. And each of these essays demonstrates in one form or another the romantic irony of insistence as an urgent dwelling upon a statement at the very moment that the aesthetic reveals that there is nothing upon which such a statement might securely dwell.

5. Both Ferris and Balfour address in some detail relevant features of Kant's aesthetic critique, but one of the more insistent and perhaps most misconstrued features of the Kantian legacy is the notion of aesthetic autonomy which is, in turn, the source of our understanding of the aesthetic as a state or domain, distinct from the domains of ethics or politics. No genuinely dialectical criticism—and Adorno remains its unsurpassed exemplar—understands the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment or the autonomy of the aesthetic simply as the retreat of art to its own domain; but the characterization of the aesthetic as a space often underwrites the now familiar political criticism of aesthetic autonomy.^[1] Terry Eagleton's neat summary of the left-wing position demonstrates the pervasiveness of this spatial logic: "art is ... conveniently sequestered from all other social practice, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values" (*IA*, 9). Other critics have developed the logic of spatialization in a more complicated and interesting fashion than simple "enclaves" and "refuges" by demonstrating how the aesthetic does not simply retreat from its historical moment but incorporates it, takes it into itself. Thomas Pfau has described this as "the capacity of the aesthetic to encrypt its own contingent historical situation" (*WP*,3). And Marc Redfield, in his response to the following essays, offers a particularly acute analysis of the insistence of the aesthetic as the secret space of historicist criticism, its unacknowledged crypt. Even when historicist critics seek to disavow or disallow the aesthetic in the name of politics, Redfield asserts, they do so only by *encrypting* the *aesthetic* itself: in their efforts to abolish it, the aesthetic "becomes the *impensee*, the encrypted and cherished secret, of historicist-political criticism" (3). But however symptomatic or inevitable the spatialization of the aesthetic may be for our understanding of the relationship between art and non-art—the aesthetic is *here* or *there* or *insidethis* or *that*—aesthetic spacing can only be derived from force: it is the effect of a break. Indeed, it may well be much more productive to understand aesthetic insistence as the *imposition* of sensuous apprehension upon historical narratives or ethical claims. If we understand an aesthetic judgment as something which

forces itself upon us without the grounding of concepts and which breaks the grip of the ethical, and if we approach aesthetic experience as something which does not deliver knowledge but which plays against the claims of knowledge, we gain a better sense of the power, force, and even violence of aesthetic insistence.^[2]

6. The following essays found their first forms as invited papers on a panel that I chaired at the 2001 NASSR conference in Seattle. I asked Ferris, Swann, and Balfour to write papers on the topic of "Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic" not only because I am a great admirer of the work of each of these scholars but also because each of them has in the midst of our historicisms and sociologies consistently reflected on the questions posed for Romanticism by problems of the aesthetic. Marc Redfield, whose own recent *Politics of Aesthetics* marks an indispensable contribution to these issues, graciously accepted my invitation to respond to the essays once they were prepared for publication. As Redfield notes in his response—titled, appropriately enough, "Reading the Aesthetic, Reading Romanticism"—"these three essays all affirm the centrality of the question of the aesthetic ... within Romantic studies [and] exemplify the diverse legacy of deconstruction" (1). Redfield emphasizes how that "diverse legacy" is reflected in essays that continue to "bear the signature of Paul de Man" and to represent "the kind of thinking that we may best call reading: reading as the effort to read the predicament—the fascination, the difficulty, the aporia or possible impossibility—of reading itself" (9). If, as Redfield points out, the insistence of the aesthetic as the necessity of reading continues to "bear the signature of Paul de Man," it also demonstrates "how differently the theme of reading can be written and read, and how diversely this theme's recurrent motifs can manifest themselves" (9).
7. The diverse modes of reading exemplified and explored by the following essays demonstrate that to read is not to take refuge from but to *subject* oneself to the adventures of power and force that are inextricable from the aesthetic. The readings undertaken by the following essays explore the forms of the power, force, and even violence inscribed in and concealed by the aesthetic as well as the power or capacity of the aesthetic to institute, to produce, to trouble. In "Aesthetic Violence and the Legitimacy of Reading Romanticism," David Ferris addresses the question of the aesthetic by attending to the figures and function of violence in contemporary critical discussion. For Ferris, it is not merely the case that the recent emphasis on historical and sociological knowledge can occur only at the expense of—and violence to—the question of the aesthetic; he is interested, rather, in the ways in which *violence* itself has come to serve as a legitimizing principle, much as *beauty* served for previous generations of criticism. Ferris explores this question by returning to the crucial—perhaps even founding—relationships between aesthetics and politics in Kant and Schiller. In revisiting this de Manian nexus of violence and the aesthetic and extending the argument set out so compellingly in his book *Silent Urns*, Ferris arrives at some crucial formulations which complicate the de Manian reading and demonstrate that insistence is the perhaps the best way to characterize the relationship between Kant and Schiller: the aesthetic, in other words, is insistent from the beginning. "What Schiller undertakes," says Ferris, "is the authorization of the aesthetic Kant invokes in the place of such an authorization. In this respect, Schiller pursues the political project of Kant's critical enterprise by fulfilling the political consequences of Kant's attempt to ground judgment" (6-7).
8. In Ferris's reading, those who would critique the aesthetic on ideological grounds fail to realize that the very possibility of critique is inextricable from the aesthetic:

This is also why the critique of the aesthetic as an ideologically charged category can in no way overcome the aesthetic or even the ideology it associates with the aesthetic since, as an example of critique, it can only appeal to the category it would dismiss for its power of dismissal. To undertake an ideological critique of the aesthetic for failing to critique itself for its aestheticism (that is, for being unable to be critical in any sense, for being simply about beauty, or simply beautiful) is to affirm precisely the means by which Schiller has

secured the possibility of critique (9).

9. The power of the aesthetic is also a precondition for Ian Balfour's critical explorations of the figures of "Subjectivity" that appear in the texts of Kant and in what Balfour terms "The Texture of Romanticism." His account of Romantic forms of "subjectivity beyond the subject" opens with a sustained discussion of the status of the Kantian aesthetic: "It is here that we can begin to insist on the crucial place of the aesthetic, as expounded paradigmatically and in massively influential fashion by Kant. His thinking along these lines, as much as that of anyone, prompts us to conceive of a subjectivity beyond the subject, of something we might call "'subjecticity.'" Balfour's reading of Kant suggests how a genuine critique of aesthetic judgment demands and even generates alternative models and figures of subjectivity, or what Balfour calls "the not-so-single subject with respect to the dynamics of aesthetic judgment" (13). While it would be wrong to suggest that Romanticism or the aesthetic *creates* what Balfour is calling "subjecticity," it is more to the point of his argument that the genuine crisis posed by aesthetic judgment for the status of the subject simultaneously gives rise to the need to think subjectivity otherwise:

"Romanticism, broadly understood, can be said to trouble the reduction of the subject to the merely subjective, even as the very same 'movement' — though that term suggests a false homogeneity — sometimes unequivocally promoted that somewhat newfangled thing called the subject in the various registers of philosophy, politics, literature, and beyond" (2).

10. In his exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and subjectivity in the registers of philosophy and Romantic literature, Balfour's attention to the "linguistic character of aesthetic judgment" in Kant demonstrates the strange power of the aesthetic to *insist* upon language. If, as Balfour puts it, "aesthetic experiences are first and foremost feelings, nothing more than ... feelings," a properly aesthetic *judgment* forces or demands its linguistic articulation: "Kant insists again and again on the linguistic character of aesthetic judgment, on the somewhat mysterious need to render a judgment that, for example, this tulip is beautiful. Indeed, it is crucial to *call* the tulip beautiful rather than simply to feel it is" (8). It is crucial, in other words, to indicate in language the beautiful tulip, to point it out and say "*that tulip there* is beautiful." Moreover, the singular, "subjective" quality of an aesthetic judgment is in turn compromised by its insistence on being spoken "with a universal voice" [*eine allgemeine Stimme*].
11. In the second half of his essay, Balfour moves from the ramifications of the force of this aesthetic linguisticity in Kant to the "discourse of aesthetic *production*" where "something of the same paradoxical texture" can be discerned or "read off" (13), "where the subject is said to be subject to something beyond itself and yet whose force finds enunciation only in, through, and as a subject" (15). Balfour turns to the letters of Keats where the famous articulations of the "poetical character" and "negative capability" offer the kind of dramatic or theatrical self-erasure that supplies "another instance of what we might call 'subjecticity'" (18): "Keats anchors poetic production in the work of a subject that exceeds the workings of what is usually thought of as a subject, a subjectivity beyond the merely subjective, a paradoxical absence of subjectivity that is the prerequisite for producing poetic subjects" (17-18). Even Wordsworth's most detailed thematizations of subjectivity in *The Prelude* are riven with the kinds of temporal and linguistic doublings and splittings that can be said to demonstrate the workings of subjectivity. But Balfour's most sustained account of "subjecticity" in the Romantic discourses of aesthetic production is devoted to Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* and its representations of poetic agency, a force or power that does not originate in the subject but would seem only to be available—expressed or represented, named or performed—through the subject. As Balfour concludes, this "texture of Romanticism" demands "the possible desirability of a word like 'subjecticity' to get at what happens in the language and thought of poetry, the aesthetic, and more, some 'thing' or some process that exceeds the subject without ever simply transcending it or leaving it behind" (25).

12. Between these two accounts of the Kantian legacies of the aesthetic—or what one might call the Kantian insistence—Karen Swann discerns and examines a certain recurrent "shape" in Shelley's poetry, "a beautiful, slumbering human form" (1). In "Shelley's Pod People," Swann explores these strange forms, alien and "beautiful dreamers" that "live a posthumous life, beyond life and death, but transcending neither" and that "speak to a fantasy of the endurance of poet and the poetic work, not as endlessly renewable, socially-efficacious resources, but as forms radically closed to our concerns" (2). As such, Shelley's figures are "related to a construction of 'the aesthetic' that descends to us from Kant through Adorno: 'the aesthetic' as autonomous, enigmatic, auratic form" (2). Swann's essay brushes against the grain of recent interpretations and mobilizations of the poet which emphasize his political and historical poetics—Shelley's "commitment to social and political change"—by stressing how the power of this poetry, the "experience" of reading it, often derives from its very resistances to our concerns: it can "strike us as most wonderful at its most difficult and hermetic, the point where it fails to yield to our reading" (2).
13. Swann's essay is marked by startling insights into the nature of the psychic and cultural investments in the Shelleyan reliquary, from the tortured passions of the Shelley circle to the often unavowed obsessions of professional Romanticists. By attending so acutely to the rich and the strange in Shelley's works and death, Swann may well produce a genuine sea change in our understanding of the poet. Her essay also intervenes in the question of aesthetic space as a kind of cryptology. Rather than decrypting Shelley's aesthetic, Swann attends closely to the aesthetic form—and power—of the Shelley crypt, the "Shelley circle's posthumous constructions" (2) and preservations of the poet as well as the "radically arrested figures" that are "strangely insistent in *The Witch of Atlas*" (13). By reading the figures of "live burials" in Shelley's strange poem alongside the poet's own overdetermined afterlife, Swann's essay demands that we reconsider the presumed naiveté of friends such as Trelawny who loved the poet enough to ask not only for his bones but for as much of the corpse as could be salvaged from the fires. In its course, Swann's essay teaches us to recognize the aesthetic as the medium through which we can read the fluid, chiasmic relationship between what is living and what is dead in the life-work and death-work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. If the Romantic figure of Shelley is aestheticized in the process, it is a process which has insisted itself from the start, a process that demands we learn how to reckon with what Swann calls the "figures of the aesthetic as that which adamantly refuses to matter in terms of human economies of desire and exchange" (3).
14. "Figures of the aesthetic which adamantly refuse to matter in terms of human economies": this is precisely the kind of aesthetic insistence that resonates in Keats's engagements with what has become if not the "mother" then at least the "foster-child" of all aesthetic objects, the "silent urn" of the poet's most famous ode. However we ultimately regard that poem's relationship with the aesthetic, it is certainly the case that by the final stanza, the speaker is addressing the urn as that which *insists*, as that which "shalt remain, in midst of other owe/ Than ours." It is the insistence of the remainder, one which is also a reminder that however much "happiness" in all its forms may insist on the object itself, the ekphrastic response it provokes is a vexed one, that "dost tease us out of thought." If the poem's aesthetic seductions have teased countless critics into the delusions of understanding, they have also prompted some of the most important critical encounters in Romantic studies, among which Ferris's chapter on the poem in *Silent Urns* is the most powerful recent example that I can point to. There Ferris reads the poem's own reading of "a Grecian Urn" and demonstrates that far from proposing any resolution between truth and beauty or between history and the aesthetic, Keats's great ode alludes to an aesthetic understanding that the performance of the poem itself resists. For Ferris, the insistence of Keats's poem is itself a reminder in the midst of our own debates that "[w]hat has still to be digested is a romanticism that no amount of ideology finger-pointing will allow us to evade, a romanticism that undertakes a reflection on the relation of historical knowledge and aesthetic understanding" (*SU*, 60). "Finger-pointing" is a fascinating way to describe this contemporary aversion to the aesthetic, especially when we consider the diectic character of Keats's ekphrastic poem and of the insistence of

the aesthetic in romanticism more generally. For if Keats's poem "consistently fails to answer its own questions about the historical status of the urn" (*SU*, 83), the questions it poses—the questions it insists upon—"confound, rather than lead to, understanding. Part of the problem that Keats *points to* in these lines is that what is being looked at does not guide or define the poet's" questions, "questions that are suspended because they cannot define what they ask after" (*SU*, 77, emphasis added). If Keats's poem insists that "the power is there," in other words, *there*, in the urn which the poem both indicates and addresses, it is a persistent if recalcitrant *aesthetic* power.

15. "The power is there" is, of course, part of a crucial declarative line in a poem which Shelley wrote about another aesthetic spirit during the summer he composed his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Whatever else "Mont Blanc" may be, it is an aesthetic object, one which—composed in and about the "awful shadow" of the sublime—insists on the aesthetic even as it undoes the mystification of aestheticizing: "Mont Blanc *yet* gleams on high — the power is there" (1.127, emphasis added). And if the poem's speaker and perhaps the poem itself refer to a non-aesthetic power of the object—point at it—it is impossible to know whether or not the pointing or the power are merely aesthetic effects. For if the power is indeed there in the object as such, the poem leaves uncertain whether the poetic declaration is not itself the result of a properly aesthetic judgment about the mountain's insistent "gleaming." If in the course of his restless, uncertain surmising, Shelley's speaker finds himself and his poem colluding between signification and indication, these are the collusions of signification and indication generated by an aesthetic insistence. *There*, after all, is something that the poem can never make into a *here*: *there* is perpetually elsewhere, it insists at that place to which we point, and it insists in the aesthetic form of pointing.
16. But it's at this point that I should, in turn, point you to the following essays: it is there where one can witness the power of critical readings which not only insist upon the aesthetic but which indicate that that's where the power of Romanticism is.

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Notes

¹*Aesthetic Theory* is, of course, the principal philosophical text to address the question of autonomization in Adorno, though the problem is present in most everything Adorno explores in the domains of music, literature, and culture. While the debates over this issue have generated a field of discussion far too complex to do justice to in a footnote, two books are particularly relevant in the context of our discussion: see Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* and J.M. Bernstein's *The Fate of Art*.

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²This is a distillation of an argument that I have recently made in more detail in "Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley."

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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

Subjectivity (On Kant and the Texture of Romanticism)

Ian Balfour, York University

The essay argues that the dynamics of the subject, as conceptualized especially by Kant, are such that the word subjectivity, with its psychological and individualistic connotations, is inadequate to them. The aesthetic subject, in production and experience, exceeds the merely subjective. The essay glances briefly at poetry and prose of the British Romantics to support this claim. This essay appears in *Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic*, a volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, prepared exclusively for Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>), University of Maryland.

Kunst schafft Ich-Ferne.

—Paul Celan

1. It could have been a typo, in this word that is not exactly a word: subjectivity. The "c" is so close to the "v" on the keyboard that one could always easily type one for the other. In what follows, I am proposing that we might begin to use, deliberately, this non-word "subjectivity" in a good many cases when we would usually have written, typed, or said "subjectivity". Why advocate such a neologism, why "subjectivity"?^[1] The older, often perfectly good word "subjectivity" is decidedly multivalent. In its most neutral senses, it denotes that which is of the order of the subject, as it sometimes does in Kant. Yet the word now tends so often to come with the considerable baggage of psychologism, as well as with connotations of individualism and sometimes its attendant ideologies, as if the subjective were a matter of sheer difference, that is to say, absolutely subjective. Along these lines, the second definition of "subjectivity" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads: "The quality or condition of viewing things exclusively through the medium of one's own mind or individuality; the condition of being dominated by or absorbed in one's personal feelings, thoughts, concerns, etc. ...".
2. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, much of what passes in and through and as the subject is hardly subjective in that individualistic, psychologistic sense. That is, in effect, what a good many philosophers and poets of the late 18th and early 19th centuries conspire to suggest. Romanticism, broadly understood, can be said to trouble the reduction of the subject to the merely subjective, even as the very same "movement"—though that term suggests a false homogeneity—sometimes unequivocally promoted that somewhat newfangled thing called the subject in the various registers of philosophy, politics, literature and beyond.
3. In thinking through this inadequacy of the notion of the sheer or merely subjective, we can begin by drawing on a late, powerful essay by Adorno, "On Subject and Object". Adorno is perhaps the theorist who has most resolutely attended to the complexities of the subject, as well as to the mutual determinations of subject and object. Adorno shows, in typically dialectical fashion, how "equivocal"—that is his word—the key terms in question are (Adorno, 741). He takes for granted that we know that the term subject used to mean something close to the opposite of what it now does. If we now tend to think of "the subject" as some version of the Cartesian thinking, willing, and acting ego (complicated or not by its inflections and subversions in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), it is good to recall an older, "more original" sense of the subject as the person who is "subject to ...". This older sense—consistent with its etymology in *subjectus* (thrown under, placed beneath)—mainly entails the subject as subservient to a sovereign. The historical dividing line could be drawn, roughly, with the

emergence of the bourgeois, democratic or quasi-democratic subject of the Enlightenment. But Adorno seems to imply that the switch from the older to the more modern sense is not as complete as it may appear, not least because the freedom of the modern subject is, in crucial ways, illusory. And to make matters slightly more complex: the term also comprehends, Adorno notes, the subject as what we would now more likely call "object," a sense still resonant in the term "subject matter", such that the terms subject and object can be thought to flip dialectically, on occasion, into each other. Subject and object are inextricably and often asymmetrically bound up in each other in a dialectic of a sort that exceeds the air-tight machine and the tendency to resolution characteristic of Hegelian narrative.

4. Not only does the term "subject" have a complicated history, the thing itself, that is, the subject itself, has a variegated track record, according to Adorno. For him, any subject worthy of the name is defined by the activity of self-reflection, of having one's eyes open. Thus in the ages of myth and fate, Adorno claims, there was simply no such thing as a subject. Yet epistemology, to say nothing of grammar (following Nietzsche), contrives to have us think of a subject in general, indeed of the possibility of a transcendental subject, even if, as Adorno suggests, history will have this subject now and then encounter what he calls the "primacy of the object" ("*Vorrang des Objekts*") (746) in a variety of mutually transforming relations. In the end, Adorno can almost predictably reverse himself to say—this time in a non-historicist vein—that actually "there is no such thing as the subject," ("*Ebensowenig allerdings 'gibt' es eigentlich Subjekt*") certainly not something that could be hypostasized in a single definition (754). But to think of epistemology and even social relations as a dialectic between subject and object, however stable or equivocal these terms are, risks leaving obscured an important domain for which the words "subjectivity" and "objectivity" prove inadequate. It risks losing sight of a kind of in-between state, a subjectivity beyond the subject, a subjectivity whose objectivity is not given and yet is not simply subjective either.
5. It is here that we can begin to insist on the crucial place of the aesthetic, as expounded paradigmatically and in massively influential fashion by Kant. His thinking along these lines, as much as that of anyone, prompts us to conceive of a subjectivity beyond the subject, of something we might call "subjecticity". But why the *aesthetic* in the first place? In Kant's critical system, the aesthetic does not come in the first place but the third, as the subject matter of the *Critique of Judgement* or Third Critique, and yet this third position acquires in the end a kind of firstness or at least secondariness. For the aesthetic—initially almost an afterthought for the critical system whose two poles were pure and practical reason—retroactively becomes the necessary but also problematic link, the perhaps impossible bridge crossing the gulf—*Kluft* is Kant's word—between nature and freedom, between knowledge and action. (Kant, German 83, English 14)^[2] In this, the aesthetic is by no means simply a matter of art. (Surely if one turns to the Third Critique to learn about art, one is bound to be deeply disappointed, since Kant is so much more concerned with wild flowers than with poetry or painting. Beyond that, Kant is interested in the representative of figurative character of the aesthetic understood in the broadest terms, as is perhaps implied in the root sense of *aesthesis* as perception.^[3]) Despite all the famous strictures about Kantian aesthetic judgement having to be a purely disinterested affair, cut off from the realm of concept or desire—such that one wonders whether anyone has ever actually had an aesthetic judgement—the aesthetic, in Kant's terms, is in some sense ubiquitous, not least because of the omnipresence of imagination posited in the first Critique. There Kant had maintained that the figural and synthetic character of imagination was a necessary ingredient in every act of knowledge. So the "aesthetic" in Kant exceeds its status as merely aesthetic by its massively important mediating function, such that it informs, in fundamental fashion, all the protocols of knowledge and action. Yet even in the circumscribed sense of aesthetic judgements of something beautiful or sublime, aesthetic experience poses a potential problem for the integrity of the Kantian system.
6. In the Copernican turn effected by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, philosophy turned finally, as it had begun to do with Descartes and Locke, from object to subject and found that much of what was thought

to be objective—most famously, space and time—emerged rather as subjective. Thus space and time became categories of *a priori* intuition (*Anschauung*), yet so hard-wired into the human subject as to allow for a certain possibility of shared experience and knowledge, at least at the level of phenomena, that is, short of knowing things in themselves. But the subject matter of the Third Critique poses a more radical problem, for it takes the singularity of aesthetic experience as its object. The experience of the beautiful risks being merely subjective: no one, by definition, can have someone else's experience—at least not yet.[4] Kant repeatedly refers to the sheer or merely subjective status ("*bloss subjektiv*") of the experience of the aesthetic (99, 29), so one can wonder, at the outset, how this sort of experience is even available to philosophy. Aesthetic experience, for Kant, is of a radically singular nature, as is the "reflective" judgement that it prompts. It is by no means a matter of knowledge and so the judgement it elicits is not a "logical" one, in Kant's terms. It is always a matter of whether, for example, *this* or *that* tulip is beautiful, not whether tulips in general are beautiful. Aesthetic experience is of the order of the sheer example, but not, unusually, an example *of* something larger than itself. Moreover, it is not so fortuitous for the philosophical system that, as Kant insists, aesthetic experiences are first and foremost feelings, nothing more than ... feelings. They are even, as Lyotard underscores, the feelings of thought, such that even thought has the feeling of feeling.[5] This utterly singular experience of, or feeling about, a single beautiful object seems then a rather uncertain ground on which to construct the bridge between knowledge and action, even for the ordinary human being, much less for the transcendental subject (Lyotard 1991, esp. 13-33).[6] Unless, as we shall see, language comes, arguably, to the rescue.

7. The threat to the system is all the more pronounced—if that is possible — in the case of the sublime, when we no longer are faced with a readily knowable object, but rather a matter of "unboundedness" (*Unbegrenztheit*)(165, 90) or even "un-form" (*Unform*), as Kant terms it (103, 33 [translated by Meredith as "formlessness"]). It is an abuse of language, a catachresis, even to call any object sublime: the most we can do, Kant maintains, is say that something—which is not necessarily a thing at all—lends itself to an experience of the sublime.[7] Even less an object of knowledge or something resembling an object of knowledge than is the case with the beautiful, the sublime, by definition, exceeds our ability to comprehend the "object" eliciting judgement. And so with the sublime, we are arguably in a domain even more radically subjective than that of the already merely subjective realm of the experience of the beautiful.
8. Yet the singular aesthetic experience, in Kant's elaboration, prompts something possibly less singular: aesthetic judgement proper. Kant insists again and again on the linguistic character of aesthetic judgement, on the somewhat mysterious need to render a judgement that, for example, this tulip is beautiful. Indeed, it is crucial to *call* the tulip beautiful rather than simply to feel it is.[8] (This rendering of aesthetic judgement is not quite a categorical imperative but it is something virtually as inevitable.) One can glimpse in the following passage how so many of the key terms enlisted to characterize the dynamics of aesthetic experience, translated into judgement, are markedly linguistic. Kant maintains:

Whether a dress, a house, or a flower is beautiful is a matter upon which one declines to be swayed (*sich beschwatzen lassen*) by any reasons or principles. We want to get a look at the Object with our own eyes, just as if our delight depended on sensation. And yet, if upon so doing, we call (*nennt*) the object beautiful, we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice (*eine allgemeine Stimme*), and lay claim (*Anspruch*) to the concurrence, whereas no private sensation would be decisive except for the observer alone and his liking. (130, 57).

To say that aesthetic *judgement* is linguistic is in some sense tautological or at least should go without saying—but the consequences of this notion are not always registered. The concatenation of terms emphasizing the linguistic character of the dynamics entailed in (Kantian) aesthetic judgement is

notable. The passage invokes "the universal voice" (*allgemeine Stimme*), who "lays claim to" (*Anspruch*—literally a "speaking to") for the agreement of the others, what is here and elsewhere called the *Beistimmung* (102, 32), the voice of the other which is already surely included, virtually, in the "universal voice". The move from the singular to the universal is partly effected by a certain doubling of the subject to begin with. Already in privacy of aesthetic experience, one "plays the judge" (*Richter spielen*) (117, 42), as if, even in the feeling in response to a beautiful or sublime object, one had to step outside, internally, oneself. The distance within the self is underscored in Kant's formulation: one is not just to *be* a judge but to *play* a judge. Moreover, in aesthetic judgement one "promises to oneself" (*sich verspricht*) the "agreement" of everyone (*Beistimmung*), a nice trick if one can do it. This structure of promising to oneself involves a certain splitting of the subject and it is all the more remarkable that this purely internal promise to oneself entails the agreement, in principle, of everyone else. Even if, as Kant says, it is only "an idea".

9. In the third *Critique*, the metaphors for these moments are primarily oral, by contrast to the first *Critique*, where the emphasis is rather on the inscriptional character of the imagination and its products. In *The Critique of Pure Reason* the work of the imagination is the necessary ingredient in all perception and all knowledge and its products are consistently figured as "monograms" or inscriptions, thus forming a striking parallel to Kant's reflections on the writing on his own philosophy, in the remarks on *Darstellung* in the two prefaces to the different version of the first *Critique*.^[9] That the imagination, as the faculty of representation, the *Darstellungsvermögen*, is categorically said to be blind—a "blind but indispensable faculty" (A 78, B 103)—does not bode so well for all perception and nothing less than all knowledge, since the understanding always depends on the materials delivered to it by the imagination. But I digress.
10. The relative "orality" of the aesthetic in the *Critique of Judgement* is a bit odd, since the aesthetic judgement of the beautiful is implicitly a universal affair. One can have private feelings and experiences of what is pleasant, *das Angenehme*, but the experience of the beautiful and its attendant judgement is in principle public or virtually so. I note this is odd, because in the famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" Kant insists on the necessarily written character of what is public. Strange as it seems, he maintains that a sermon given before what we might call a public—a church congregation—does not count as public.^[10] Yet perhaps more important than deciding on the primacy of the oral or written character of this aesthetic voice is to recognize that the inexorable movement from feeling to language is the key moment in the objectification of the subjective, a movement of and within the subject to something more and other than the simply subjective. Given that language is, by definition, shared, however unevenly, within a community, the turn from feeling to language, even the language of feeling, seems to hold out the possibility of a more solid, non-subjective, foundation for the aesthetic in itself and as well as for its status as the posited link between knowledge and action.
11. But is the move to the "I" of language much more certain a ground than the singularity of a possibly private feeling? Benveniste's seminal essay "On Subjectivity in Language" suggests otherwise. Far from the "I" being the designator of a stable concept or of a discrete individual, the "I" refers to the act of discourse in which it is enunciated, to where the pronoun is pronounced, as it were. To imagine that "I"—an instance of what linguists call a "shifter"—referred to a "particular individual" would be, Benveniste says, "to admit a permanent contradiction in language and a state of anarchy in practice". (226). Benveniste goes on to argue:

How could one and the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? We are in the presence of a class of words, the "personal pronouns," that escape the status of all the other signs of language. To what then does I refer? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the

speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have elsewhere called an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which the I designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as "subject." And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. (226-7)

Benveniste's notion of the instantaneous and temporary character of the subject as performed in language accords well with the radical singularity of the aesthetic experience as expounded by Kant. But both accounts suggest how the very terms needed to enunciate that singularity are shadowed by a certain generality, such that the voice is in some sense always more than that of a particular I, that is, a general or even "universal" voice. As such, Benveniste's analysis of the I in its enunciatory mode jibes with Kant's critical project, which attempts to lay out the conditions of possibility for the transcendental subject. But this is only to the extent that everyone can say "I" but cannot possibly mean the same thing — "I" — in saying so. It is no accident that Benveniste's manner of thinking subjectivity beyond subjectivity proceeds, rather as Hegel's does, via the grammaticality of the pronoun.[\[11\]](#)

12. So far we have been considering the not-so-single subject with respect to the dynamics of aesthetic judgement. Something of the same paradoxical texture, it turns out, can be read off from the discourse of aesthetic *production*. One could pursue this line further in Kant, in his pointed discussion of genius in the Third Critique. Yet it would broaden and perhaps deepen the discussion if we turn away from Kant to consider a number of key passages in the reflections of the British Romantics on poetry and genius. Some of the Romantics reason, as Kant does, that "genius" is a faculty that contributes to the production of all art. Kant tends to speak of "genius" and not "a genius," as on the order of a Goethe or a Mozart. But others speak of a more singular sort of genius, designating by that term a particularly sovereign or inspired artist who vaults above the others more or less — less, actually — of his kind. This sort of artist is thought to be blessed with a preternatural gift unalloyed by or at least not interfered with by learning or craft, an "original genius". One sometimes imagines that the artist of this sort is a rather Romantic invention. Yet the genealogy charted long ago by M.H. Abrams, and rehearsed more recently by Jonathan Bate, returns us to Addison (especially *Spectator* 160) and his contemporaries.[\[12\]](#) (Here, as elsewhere, one has to re-think the absolute divide between the Romantics and the Augustans, of the sort trotted out in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.)
13. Certainly the poems of the British Romantics are replete with invocations of muses, testimonies to prophetic inspiration, and comparisons between poet's voices and Aeolian harps, all of them pointing to the poetic persona being subject to a voice — or a force like a voice — that comes from somewhere above, outside, beneath, or beyond the poet. Sometimes these poetic devices seem just that: poetic devices, trappings of lyrical convention with little or no purchase on the beliefs of the poets. Yet appeals to Aeolian harps and prophetic inspiration riddle the poetological or theoretical reflections of the very same Romantics, where presumably the truth claims are rather different. Here too we shall see any number of configurations where the subject is said to be subject to something beyond itself and yet whose force finds enunciation only in, through, and as a subject.
14. Keats's famous letter to Woodhouse on the "poetical character" actually takes the concept of genius as its point of departure. For our purposes, it helps to recall the text at some length:

Your Letter gave me great satisfaction, more on account of its friendliness than any relish of that matter in which it is accounted so acceptable in the "genius irritable." The best answer I can give you is in a clerk-like manner to make some observations on two principle points, which seem to point like indices into the midst of the whole pro and con about genius, and views, and achievements, and ambition, and coetera. 1ST As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that

sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen ... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no Identity, he is continually filling in for and filling some other Body. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute. The poet has none; no identity. He is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say that I write no more? (194-95)

Feeling the burden of the past, the major Romantics were torn between the two not very similar exemplars of Shakespeare and Milton.^[13] Virtually all of them aspired to write, variously, epics and dramas. All failed, more or less spectacularly, at the epic. A moderately higher level of success was achieved in the dramas. Keats was not alone in aspiring to be a kind of Shakespeare *après la lettre*. It is no accident that in this speculation about the non-identity of the poetical character, Keats invokes the author who scarcely, so far as we know, wrote in his own voice, an author who could just as easily speak (in) the voice of Imogen or Iago, conveniently bracketing morals or beliefs, since, for poetic purposes, its ideological content is beside the point. Never speaking simply in his or her own voice, the poet creates poetical characters, that is to say characters with definition, but his or her ability to create such defined and definite characters is predicated precisely on a lack of identity, a lack of definition in himself or herself.

15. Drama is also the literary mode uppermost in Keats' mind when he formulates the doctrine of Negative Capability. He had just been thinking of *Richard III* and Edmund Kean as a actor, when he praised to his brothers the disposition of the poet that can dwell in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" and entertain a certain resistance to identity. (60). Shakespeare, we are told, possessed this capacity "so enormously". Drummond Bone, in a valuable essay on "The Emptiness of Genius: Aspects of Romanticism," invokes these moments of Keatsian theory, in an argument centering on Coleridge and Jean Paul, to point to the paradoxical status of genius for the Romantics: so often it is conceived in terms of emptiness, precisely where one might expect a rhetoric of plenitude (Bone, *passim*). For our purposes, it is crucial that Keats anchors poetic production in the work of a subject that exceeds the workings of what is usually thought of a subject, a subjectivity beyond the merely subjective, a paradoxical absence of subjectivity that is the prerequisite for producing poetic subjects. Another instance of what we might call "subjecticity".
16. A related but differently inflected speculation on the poetic subject can be found in Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry." Shelley offers a decidedly expansive notion of poetry, returning it to its sometimes general, Aristotelian sense of making and thus seeing poetry where one might least expect it as, for example, in the making of laws. The poet, as maker, stands as the exemplary man, and of man in general Shelley says at the outset:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in a lyre and produces not melody alone but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds and motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them in a determined proportion of sound, even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre (277).

The figure of the lyre, so often compared to the voice of the poet, is likened to nothing less than "man".

Its enlistment makes sense in Shelley's generalization of the poetic faculty far beyond those with a claim to being called poets in the strict sense. For our purposes, it is important that the subject is constructed here as simultaneously active and passive, "subject of" as well as "subject to". As an instrument subject to the wind for the sounds it produces, it is, in its structure, radically passive. The subject is hardly the source of the sounds it produces: it is rather the medium or vehicle for a discourse that comes from elsewhere. But Shelley is concerned that the comparison not issue in a sense of the sheer passivity of man, and so he stresses the sounds the instrument produces, commenting on the inadequacy of the figure of the lyre, not least for communicating the sense of the subject he has in mind. Thus the lyre "accommodates", it produces, it "acts".

17. Moreover, when Shelley shifts from man in general to the poetical faculty, however broadly generalized from those we call poets, that faculty is said to "create new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure" (293).^[14] This claim is immediately followed by one pointing to how—if it is not already clear—Shelley tends to conceive of two different modes of language corresponding, at least roughly, to the passive and active poles of the (split) subject of poetry: "... it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order, which may be called the beautiful and the good" (293). Reproduction is linked to representation, the more or less passive, mechanical mirroring of what is. Shelley's essay multiplies the terms for this sort of, typically mimetic, representation: "reduplication", "mirror", "picture", "record", "image", or perceptual equivalents such as "apprehension". The paradigm is summed up in the following passage:

... poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty [imagination] whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from the nature of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations than color, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which is it the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; ... (279).

Here we glimpse both the primacy of representation and the notion that language is subject to the inscrutable faculty of the imagination, whose glossing in Shelley hardly suggests a mode of mind available for control by one's consciousness. (As in Kant, the source of the imagination is thought to be hidden from us, and as in Locke, the products of language refer not directly to things but to thoughts.) Poetry worth its name is not even composed, if that tends to imply deliberation. Poetry appears as if instantaneously:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determinations of the will. A man cannot say "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. ... when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has even been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. (294).

Even when located within—though here too the figuration is sometimes cast as external, as it is in the wind—the source of poetry is far beyond the conscious control of the poet. Shelley can appeal to the example of Milton and his own thematization of inspiration: "... for Milton conceived the Paradise Lost as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the muse having

"dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song". (294) What many might understand as a mere "literary device"—the appeal to inspiration—Shelley construes in the most literal fashion.

18. To this relatively passive model of representation and reproduction is conjoined, perhaps uneasily, a model of language as action or institution, of which we have already seen some versions: accommodation, institution, creation, etc. William Keach identifies the two poles as the representational and the expressive, the latter term indeed corresponding to a good many passages on poetic (in the strict and not at all strict senses) production. In linguistic terms, these two poles are aligned with the constative and the performative, the latter being not quite identical with the expressive, since that category assumes a certain interiority which is not requisite for the performative. Furthermore, this later pole, of expression of performativity is linked to what Keach calls the "non-representational" character of form, which Shelley variously designates by terms such as "arrange," "order," and "combination"[\[15\]](#), that is, in general, to the syntactic aspect of language, which is not in itself meaningful but without which there would be no meaning. It is in this realm that the young Edmund Burke located the sublime power of words, the sublime being, once again, a veritable paradigm for the locus of subjectivity.
19. As in Keats, so in Shelley, the poetic subject is scarcely a subject in vaguely Cartesian fashion. What emerges from the subject—but only through the subject—can only in the most neutral and misleading sense be termed "subjective". Shuttling between the poles of the two main and not particularly compatible senses of "subject," this poetic subject is better thought along the lines of "subjectivity" than "subjectivity," if the latter term connotes an individualized, and largely conscious discourse of an identifiable subject.
20. But can the examples of Keats and Shelley really stand in for the variegated discourses of Romanticism, even in Britain, to say nothing of on the Continent? Would there not be significant counter-examples? Keats's own formulation seems to separate his Poetical Character from, for example, the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime". Could we not find in Wordsworth, for one, a full-fledged discourse of the subject, highly individualized and attendant to the peculiarities of his life, his psyche, his psychology? Certainly the monument of *The Prelude*, perpetually scandalous in generic terms, insofar as it an autobiography and an epic at the same time, seems to offer a prime example of the "subjective". One could hardly argue that anyone else could have written *The Prelude*, with its wealth of autobiographical detail, whose charged meaning could not quite be so charged for anyone other than William Wordsworth. And yet from the original draft opening ("Was it for this ... ?") or the eventually published beginning, "O there is blessing in this gentle breeze ...," the poem's voice is crossed by prior voices, Virgil's in the first instance or a (transformed) invocation of the muse in the second. Wordsworth not infrequently invokes the model of the ancient Biblical prophets, who are nothing if not vehicles for a divine voice not their own. And sometimes at seemingly the most personal moments—such as the Dream of the Arab—will present an experience as happening to himself in one version and to another person in another, which is rather unsettling if we are to take the poem as the faithful transcription of a singular life.[\[16\]](#) Wordsworth is scarcely unaware of this divided or traversed character of his poetic voice and indeed the thematization of this split character may be one reason he can think of his own story as exemplary of the growth of a poet's mind. I cannot do justice here to all the possible counter-examples to the paradigm of subjectivity I am trying to sketch but the over-determined example of Wordsworth does help suggest that a mere thematization of subjectivity rather than subjectivity is not quite enough to undermine the latter concept's viability.
21. We have been concentrating on theorists and poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the claims of these writers are not themselves cast in historical terms: they believe themselves to be addressing the character of art and aesthetic judgement irrespective of time or place. And certainly the sorts of insights rehearsed here are not narrowly limited to Romanticism conceived as a period. The

epigraph from Paul Celan, a post-Romantic writer in a sense that respects from sides of the hyphen, claims, in his (in)imitable style, "Kunst schafft Ich-Ferne", literally "Art makes I-distance" (193). Even if the I in some sense makes art, art makes the I and in such a way that the I is distanced from itself: the I is not simply I. It cannot say I, anymore than it can say "I will compose poetry". And this dictum comes from a writer whose principal mode was the lyric poem, the mode where one might most expect to encounter a subject with subjectivity. Hence, the possible desirability of a word like "subjecticity" to get at what happens in the language and thought of poetry, the aesthetic, and more, some "thing" or some process that exceeds the subject without ever simply transcending it or leaving it behind.

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Notes

¹ The word does not, to my knowledge, exist in any dictionary, though one can find instances of it through a Google search, mainly in the context of linguistics.

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² On the place of the aesthetic in Kant's system of critical philosophy, see Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of Faculties* and Paul de Man, "Phenomenality".

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³ Rodolphe Gasché, in his recent book on Kant is one of the surprisingly few critics to emphasize that in the Third Critique Kant is far more "interested" in nature than in art. Indeed, Kant's comments on literature and art are relatively flat-footed. It might even have been a mark of Kant's sagacity that he turned down the offer of a Professorship in Poetry.

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⁴ Almost inevitably, having someone else's experience becomes the stuff of science fiction, as in Philip K.

Dick, for one.

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⁵ See Lyotard, esp. pp. 13-33. For an excellent account of the status of feeling in "poststructuralist" thought, see Rei Terada, *passim*.

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⁶ See, for a similar judgement, Henrich, pp. 35-6.

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⁷ Paul Guyer notes in this context that "we use the grammar of objectivity" (199).

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⁸ Here I am following an argument made in Derrida's painstaking analysis of Kant in the "Parergon" essay in *Truth in Painting*.

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⁹ On the status of writing in Kant, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *passim*, and Willi Goetschel. I address the inscriptional character of the imagination in Kant more fully in a work-in-progress on the sublime. For the best general account of the theory and mobilization of imagination in the period, see Forest Pyle.

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¹⁰ On this and related matters in Kant, see Habermas, especially pp. 102-116.

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¹¹ On the status of the "I" in its (interrelated) aesthetic and logical registers in Hegel, see Paul de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics". De Man shows via Hegel's own analysis ("we cannot say anything in language that is not general") of the grammatical status of the "I" how, and in what sense, one has to conclude that "I cannot say I."

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¹² See M.H. Abrams especially chapter VIII, and Jonathan Bate.

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¹³ For the two classic but differently inflected studies of this issue, see Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom.

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¹⁴ For a full, insightful, nuanced reading of Shelley's "Defence" in its rhetorical and conceptual complications, see William Keach, especially Chapter 1.

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¹⁵ Earl Wasserman's reading of the "Defence" stresses the crucial motif of order. See especially Wasserman, Chapter 7, passim.

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¹⁶ I explore this texture of *The Prelude's* language in Balfour, 2002, especially pp.19-27.

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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

Aesthetic Violence and the Legitimacy of Reading Romanticism

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An examination of aesthetic violence in de Man and Schiller, in particular, the role of such violence in sustaining the aesthetic practices on which the historical and political reading of Romanticism is founded. This essay appears in *Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic*, a volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, prepared exclusively for Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>), University of Maryland.

1. In the course of his essay "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," Paul de Man describes the relation between violence and the aesthetic as one in which the education carried out in the name of the aesthetic conceals the violence through which it is made possible. De Man writes: "Aesthetic education by no means fails; it succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible" (*Rhetoric*, 289). This remark reveals two fundamental propositions. First, aesthetic education is only possible through a violence that stands as its originary act. Second, the purpose of aesthetic education is to conceal this same violence. Why de Man insists upon such violence and such concealment is more readily ascertainable from the context of this remark: a reading of the figure of the dance in texts by Kleist and Schiller. The pattern of violence and concealment is our guide into a reading that would reveal "some of what is hidden behind Schiller's ideology of the aesthetic" (*Rhetoric*, 265). What is then at stake is our ability to read the textual role of a dance whose originary violence is no longer concealed by an aesthetic devoid of ideological claims. To put this more succinctly, what is at stake is our ability to read or discern ideology.
2. To pose the question of our ability to read or discern ideology is no small matter at a time when the interpretative pendulum has swung towards increasing textual transparency in the form of an insistence upon historical and sociological concerns as arbiters of literary significance. Nowhere has this stake been more pressing than in Romanticism, particularly at a time when the study of this period shows an increasing inability to distinguish itself from other literary periods. Current angst over the long term existence of this period is directly attributable to the textual transparency that has been enforced upon so much literary interpretation. The irony that Romanticism should now serve as a means of historical knowledge would not be lost on the Romantics who so insistently reflected upon the means of knowledge in those texts now enlisted as windows in the service of social history. Here, the stake of de Man's remark in his essay on Kleist cannot be separated from the work of those who would readily oppose themselves and their work to the de Manian project of reading. Such a congruity can be realized if the aesthetic, which plays such a key role in concealing violence for de Man, is renamed history: it is ultimately the transparency of a text that authorizes access to social history. Such transparency may even take the form of what is not in a text, what is absent being all the more readily discernible because it is not there. If the question posed by Romanticism, and subsequently by de Man in his essay on Kleist, is how to intervene in a critical and historical discourse whose purpose is the concealment of its own means, then, what is at stake in discerning and determining ideology is the possibility of criticism. In the decision about such a possibility, the legitimacy of reading Romanticism appears as this period's most insistent question about the current status and purpose of literary study, about the extent to which an education carried out in the name of history remains an aesthetic education. As such, it is to the means of criticism that one must turn, once again, to understand this question.
3. De Man's description of a violence concealed by the aesthetic indicates the necessity that criticism locate some kind of failure through which it may authorize itself. However, de Man states that his

purpose is not to judge or criticize Schiller's text as having in some way failed where Kleist's succeeds. In the sentence preceding the one describing the concealment of violence, De Man writes: "The point is not that the dance fails and that Schiller's idyllic description of a graceful but confined freedom is aberrant" (*Rhetoric*, 289). For de Man, neither failure nor aberrance can be called upon to limit the success of an aesthetic education. By the same token, neither can be called upon to authorize a critical position in relation to such an aesthetic education. Since failure and aberrance cannot sustain such a position, the problem we are left with imposes itself precipitously. If aesthetic education is to be criticized, and thereby limited in its historical and political reach, from what position is it possible to legitimize and thereby sustain such a criticism? Through what opening does such a criticism become possible without legitimizing precisely what it criticizes?

4. The success of aesthetic education, de Man suggests, is measured by its ability to conceal the violence in which it originates. An incipient violence would then appear to offer the means by which a critique of aesthetic education may be undertaken. Yet, the mere occurrence of violence does not substantiate violence as a critical category. By itself, violence is not inherently critical but one means through which an event or act is made manifest. In this case, what violence is has no privileged role—as if, in the realm of deconstructive reading, the mere mention of violence possessed the textual transparency so necessary to historical reading. In the case of de Man's remark, the ability of violence to perform such a critical role relies less on the fact of its empirical occurrence than the concealment through which it is recognized as having taken place. In order of significance, this concealment has priority since it is both the means by which the aesthetic establishes itself as a category and the means by which violence is recognized as the unavoidable and originary act of the aesthetic. In this case, any critique made in the name of violence is a critique of concealment aimed at the discovery of violence. The critical force attributed to violence here depends on the revelation of its concealment. In such cases, concealment is read as the concealment of what threatens legitimacy whether or not this be the legitimacy of aesthetic or historical education.
5. If the sequence enabling this critique is pursued further, it becomes apparent that the discovery of violence is only possible because aesthetic education permits it and does so by failing to conceal its concealment of violence. This failing may of course be conceptualized as the condition of all such founding acts thereby providing criticism with a source of authority and legitimacy it otherwise lacks. In this case, violence becomes the generalized condition that both authorizes and affirms the presence of critique to the point that one merely needs to mention violence to legitimize a given critical position. The rest can be left unsaid.^[1] In the case of aesthetic education, such violence appears as the consequence of its failure to conceal its own concealment. While this failing can certainly trigger a critique of aesthetic education in the name of violence, pursuing such a critique will miss the point completely, will miss the point that, in promoting this critique by its failure to conceal concealment, aesthetic education will have successfully legitimized and thereby sustained the project of criticism in an aesthetics of violence or, rather, in a failure, like Schiller's dance, that can be remembered for its beauty. In the realm of the aesthetic nothing succeeds like the revelation of failure. Why the aesthetic, through which this failure is first articulated as its foundational gesture, should now be said to have failed and thereby associated with ideology, is a most telling example of this concealment of concealment.
6. In this context, to offer a critique of the aesthetic from the perspective of violence is to practice a complicity between the critical and the aesthetic which, within the sphere of literary study, has taken the form of a thematic criticism.^[2] Critique in this case would enact the fundamental lesson of an aesthetic education even to the point of authorizing a critique of the violence de Man regards as its not quite concealed origin. The insistence of the aesthetic as the underwriter of this critique indicates the difficulty of developing a critique of the aesthetic that would not, unwittingly and unavoidably, reproduce the founding gesture of the aesthetic and the education carried out in its name.^[3] The

possibility of a critique of the aesthetic thus becomes a question of the means by which this complicity between the aesthetic and the critical is articulated, in short, a question about the operation of an aesthetic education that insists on yet conceals its presence as a fundamental element in our literary-critical and philosophical experience.

7. Our failure to recognize or even bear witness to education as an aesthetic project rather than the inculcation of certain bodies of knowledge or, when an appeal to content no longer suffices, as the source of valuable analytic skills transferable to any number of professions, is symptomatic of the current situation of literary study and its confusion of knowledge with specific modalities or disciplines of knowledge. Arguably, this failure is already a sign of an education no longer able to acknowledge its essentially aesthetic character never mind the history to which it belongs. Divorced from an emphasis on the means by which it is carried out, education can easily foster the idea that it is engaged in a serious undertaking whose means and goals are far removed from the frivolous contemplation of beauty as well as the contemporary critical sense that any understanding derived from or through the aesthetic is irremediably tainted with ideology. Such an occlusion of the aesthetic as the means of education is motivated by nothing less than a desire to realize the various goals for which education has become a medium—not the least of which is the formation of social, cultural community, the political state. In the face of this desire, it is only natural that the aesthetic not just fail but must do so out of necessity. Such a desire allows no other option particularly at a time when the humanities, not to mention romanticism, experience so much difficulty in articulating their significance. In the end, the necessity out of which such a desire emanates is nothing less than the necessity of securing the critical project that has depended, since Kant, on the aesthetic. As such, this desire (which can be recognized as a striving or a drive [*Trieb*] after Freud but also, already in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*—and hasn't education become a mode of striving, a means to another end?) cannot be separated from the aesthetic project it has submitted to such trenchant and polemical critique in the name of ideology.^[4] Indeed, this desire is already part of an aesthetic understanding whose programmatic unfolding includes its own negation, whose purpose is assured by the negation through which it becomes merely aesthetic and through which it reasserts itself as the effect of its own critique.
8. If the possibility of a critique of the aesthetic is already an effect of the aesthetic, then, the historical persistence of this category will be unassailable as long as critique is understood as the sole means of its limitation. In this case, the insistence of the aesthetic is the insistence of an era whose critical vocation, one can also say, whose modernity, is guaranteed by the repetition of the category it would otherwise separate itself from by means of critique. To speak of the aesthetic in these terms is to speak of an historical unfolding governed by a critical project unable to authorize itself by critique alone, even by the invocation of a violence within its own operation. The covert return of the aesthetic (in another form, under another name, that is, aesthetically) as the means of sustaining such a critical project indicates the extent to which the aesthetic occupies a place of uncriticizability by staging its own critique in the name of violence. If this is all that were at stake in the aesthetic, criticism could be left alone to enjoy the fruits of its labor as it pursues the goal of a truly beautiful critique, perhaps even a beautiful violence such as that envisaged by Marinetti in a passage cited by Walter Benjamin at the end of his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility."^[5] However, more is at stake in this resistance to criticism: an aesthetic that answers to no law save its own even when that law shields itself behind a violence it cannot help but criticize. Here, aesthetic education envisages a freedom freed from the constraint of having been dictated in the form of a critical limit. In fact, as Schiller is the first of the moderns to recognize, the aesthetic is in this respect resolutely oriented towards this most political of problems, namely freedom, even if this is a problem that politics has been powerless to resolve. What is at stake, however, is that it should not be resolved. Only, that it should fail, repeatedly.
9. The second letter of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* explicitly announces this stake as

follows:

Is it not . . . untimely to be casting around for a code of laws for the aesthetic world . . . when the spirit of philosophical inquiry is being expressly challenged by present circumstances to concern itself with that most perfect of artworks: the construction of true political freedom? (Letter 2 ; 7)

The spirit of philosophical inquiry is to receive some assistance from what Schiller describes as the "code of laws for the aesthetic world." It is to receive this assistance in order to construct a true political freedom that philosophy, through its turn towards ever greater abstraction, has been unable to fulfill. When this fulfillment is attained, what will emerge, according to Schiller, is the "most perfect of artworks." Through this recourse to the model of the artwork, Schiller's aesthetic project reveals its affinity with the task of constructing a political state described by Plato in the *Laws* when he refers to the creation of such a state as authoring a tragedy.^[6] The significance of returning to this Platonic example is the fact that it takes place in the wake of Kant's recognition of his inability to ground that most sociable and communal of activities: aesthetic judgment. The project undertaken by Kant's *Critique of Judgment* would also have had the effect of legitimizing the aesthetic in terms of politics and its social program, by discovering, through the aesthetic, the laws that govern the operation of judgment. Kant's inability to furnish a ground for judgment in the case of aesthetic judgment arises from a conflict within aesthetic judgment itself. The solution Kant proposes as a means of alleviating this difficulty is, simply, to eliminate the conflict in which it originates, a conflict that arises from the necessity of keeping aesthetic judgments distinct from logical determinate judgments that can be measured against a concept.^[7] What Schiller undertakes is the authorization of the aesthetic Kant invokes in the place of such authorization. In this respect, Schiller pursues the political project of Kant's critical enterprise by fulfilling the political consequences of Kant's attempt to ground judgment.^[8] What this amounts to in Schiller is, in effect, the founding of the political state through the legitimation of the aesthetic that marks the limit of Kant's undertaking.

10. Schiller's transformation of this limit into a force of legitimation occurs in a footnote to his definition of the aesthetic in Letter 20:

I add here the superfluous comment that . . . our mind (*Gemüt*) in the aesthetic state does indeed act freely, is in the highest degree free from all compulsion, but is in no way free from laws; and that this aesthetic freedom is distinguished from logical necessity in thinking, or moral necessity in willing, only by the fact that the laws according to which the mind behaves *are not represented* (*nicht vorgestellt werden*), and because they encounter no resistance, never appear as a constraint. (Letter 20; 143 [trans. modified])^[9]

The laws that govern the aesthetic state turn out to be aesthetic laws in the same sense that the idea governing aesthetic judgment in Kant must be an aesthetic idea. The solution that Kant recognizes as the limit of his attempt to ground aesthetic judgment becomes, for Schiller, confirmation of a law operating within the aesthetic. Through the failure of this law to find representation Schiller reconciles the conflict between law and freedom that lies at the base of every attempt to construct a state that would also be meaningful for the individuals who belong to it. Without law, there is no state, but without freedom, there is no point to the state for its individual citizens. Recognition of an antinomy between these two aspects of the state leads to the necessity of what Schiller calls an aesthetic education. The purpose of such an education, it can be presumed, is to permit the recognition of laws that are never represented, in effect, the recognition of something that acts like the law but can never take the form of a law. To put this more succinctly, what is to be achieved, if the problem of politics in practice is to be resolved, is the means to represent the failure of the means of representing such law. With such an achievement law is preserved from critique since it remains protected behind the event of

its non-appearance even as the effect of this non-appearance is recognized.

11. Schiller argues that it is through the awareness of beauty that the goal of this education will be achieved. That beauty is a source of such laws is explicitly stated by Schiller in Letter 23 when he defines what takes place in aesthetic education: "aesthetic education . . . subjects to laws of beauty all those spheres of human behaviour in which neither natural laws, nor yet rational laws, are binding upon human caprice" (Letter 23; p. 169). What these laws are, as the footnote to Letter 20 cited above indicates, is less important than the manner in which they exist. As Letter 20 states, they are not to be represented. The laws at work in beauty, the laws of the aesthetic, are therefore laws constituted by the withholding of their appearance in the form of law. As a result, what these laws rely upon in order to perform the role of a law is the recognition that they are represented by not being represented. The ability to recognize such laws is the education offered by beauty.
12. Why Schiller should be constrained to formulate a law which in this formulation is protected from all constraint can be understood most easily if it is remembered that constraint in this context is the necessity of a form of representation for the law. Without this constraint, what articulates the laws of the aesthetic is never placed in a position from which it may be contested and thereby subject to critique. In this respect, the representation of a failure to represent these laws is the sign of laws that remain in their concealment. To remain in this concealment is to obey the aesthetic state to which these laws owe their existence. Like the use of violence as a means of staging a critique of aesthetic education, such concealment is the means of positing a critical power. In both instances, the aesthetic plays a crucial role by assuring the possibility of such a power while removing it from all critical reach.
13. Not only does such a law retain its freedom to be always lawful, but, by the same means, such a law becomes, in effect, *the* law. In this respect, it derives all its force as law from its failure to take the form of law. This is the law at work in the laws of Schiller's aesthetic beauty. As should already be clear, the significance of this law does not reside at all in what it decrees, that is, in what it is about or what it represents, rather, its significance resides in the uncriticizability it assumes by not being represented. [10] Only on account of this uncriticizability does it assume the force of a law from which all other laws can be judged. In this respect, the laws of the aesthetic in Schiller exist according to a law that guarantees the possibility of critique without ever submitting itself to critique, without ever allowing itself to be measured according to what it represents. The aesthetic in Schiller is both the embodiment of this law and the means of its recognition which, incidentally, depends, like the violence de Man describes as the possibility of aesthetic education, on an awareness of its failure to be represented.
14. To the extent that any historical or political position is, by its very nature, also a position of critique (of another history or another politics) and is made in the name of the truth of that position (even when this takes the form of truly denying truth), the law of the aesthetic, as Schiller presents it, is the legitimizing possibility of that critique. This is also why the critique of the aesthetic as an ideologically charged category can in no way overcome the aesthetic or even the ideology it associates with the aesthetic since, as an example of critique, it can only appeal to the category it would dismiss for its power of dismissal. To undertake an ideological critique of the aesthetic for failing to critique itself for its aestheticism (that is, for being unable to be critical in any sense, for being simply about beauty, or simply beautiful) is to affirm precisely the means by which Schiller has secured the possibility of critique.
15. This law, through which the aesthetic itself is not only recognized as the aesthetic but also founds the power of critique in law, is instrumental in realizing the political project of Schiller's text. As Schiller had insisted as early as Letter 2, the aesthetic alone offers hope to the political: "If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom" (Letter 2; 9 [trans. modified]). [11] The problem of

politics in practice—how to negotiate the necessity of law and the necessity of freedom within the same state—would here be solved according to a law that is not represented yet still recognized as law. Not only does such a law retain a freedom by refusing to subject itself to criticism through its refusal to be represented but this refusal authorizes the critical power so necessary to the realization of the political state. The securing of this critical power through the aesthetic is, in effect, the securing of the political. Securing the political through a law exemplified by the aesthetic gives to politics the force and power of a critique it is unable to attain by any other means but which is essential to the existence of the political. The necessity of this power is part of the nature of a political or even historical position since such a position is inconceivable except as the critique of another politics or another history. The law of the aesthetic, as Schiller presents it, is the possibility of a modernity whose critical disposition can only end in politics. The insistently political nature of our critical modernity is itself a sign of this law.

16. To follow the aesthetic does not mean to remain bound to the aesthetic and the sphere in which it operates. Schiller makes this clear in Letter 4 when he distinguishes the artisan and the artist from the political or pedagogical artist:

When the artisan (*der mechanische Künstler*) lays hands upon the formless mass in order to shape it to his ends, he has no scruple in doing it violence (*Gewalt*). When the artist of beauty (*der schöne Künstler*) lays hands upon the same mass, he has just as little scruple in doing it violence. The artist of beauty respects the material he is handling not the least bit more than the artisan; however, through an apparent (*scheinbar*) yielding to the material, he will seek to deceive the eye which takes the freedom of this material under its protection. For the pedagogic and political artist (*pädagogischen und politischen Künstler*) things are quite different, man is at the same time his material and his goal (*Aufgabe*). Here, the purpose (*Zweck*) turns back into the material and, only because the whole serves the parts, must the parts yield (*sich . . . fügen*) to the whole. With a respect quite different from the yielding which the artist of beauty pretends towards his material, must the artist of the state (*Staatskünstler*) approach his material; he must preserve (*schonen*) its authenticity and personality, not merely subjectively and for a deceptive effect on the senses but rather objectively and for its inner essence (*innre Wesen*). (Letter 4; 18-20 [trans. modified]).

In this sequence, Schiller presents three categories of production. The first two, the artisan and the artist of beauty, are both viewed as practicing violence towards their material. With the artisan there is no concealment of the violence, but with the artist of beauty, Schiller speaks of the appearance of a yielding that would conceal the violence practiced by the artist. In the third instance, the political and pedagogical artist, no such appearance is permitted lest it leave the trace of a violence that would compromise the task of preserving the "inner essence" of the subject of this artist. The political state in which true freedom occurs is then one in which the concealment of the artist is concealed to the point of appearing not to exist. No other conclusion is possible if Schiller's description of the law governing the "construction of true political freedom" is taken seriously: the law which does not appear as law, which does not take the form of law yet rules all law. According to such a law, not even violence can appear as violence precisely because it is not given the means to do so. Violence, in Schiller's account, only arises when the material to be acted on is different from the goal of this action. In the case of Schiller's pedagogical or political artist, the means is inseparable from the product. Solely on the basis of the absence of this difference between means and goal, Schiller will attribute no violence to the work of the political artist. The absence of violence becomes, in this instance, a sign that a true political freedom is achieved. At the same time, this achievement marks a massive critique of art and the aesthetic on account of their violence. The emergence of the political artist, the artist of the state, is then the emergence of the position from which all art can be criticized as an essentially violent

undertaking because it is essentially aesthetic. What Schiller precipitates here is an overcoming of art and aesthetic in the name of a politics that is synonymous with a freedom from violence but this same overcoming is legitimized solely by what it seeks to overcome. This is why Schiller can only speak of true political freedom as the perfect work of art: it lacks the violence that renders art imperfect or, to put this bluntly, it is more successful in hiding art's concealment of its violence since the law that guides it is without representation. The appearance of the political (which means here the legitimation of the political by a law that is not a law) is then achieved under the aegis of a critique of violence.

17. The whole possibility of a true political freedom, including the possibility of both freedom and the political, depends on an apparent non-violent moment in which the critique of violence is established. This critique of violence preserves for the political the force of a law even as it would subject all other laws to criticism on account of their violence which, in Schiller's argument, characterizes a law unable to preserve itself from the violent representation of a means that is not also its goal. It is precisely this falsification, this deception between means and goal that ideological criticism has exploited and particularly in the case of a Romanticism whose future is envisaged in the form of historical correctness.[\[12\]](#)
18. Within the project of the aesthetic education envisaged by Schiller, to overcome the aesthetic is to overcome the instrument Schiller declares in Letter 9 to be precisely what will lead to true political freedom: fine art.[\[13\]](#) Fine art, as the exemplar of what the aesthetic produces, can only be followed to a certain point. Here, the greatest difficulty entertained by Schiller's text is evaded. The task of overcoming the aesthetic in the name of true political freedom necessarily remains an aesthetic task. This is why the political critique of the aesthetic is hopelessly compromised from its inception since it is already part of an aesthetic project it has forgotten how to remember. For Schiller to envisage this, all that can be proposed is a politics within limits, the limits of what Schiller himself is forced to call aesthetic determinability.[\[14\]](#)
19. This conclusion indicates several difficulties, not the least of which affect the reading of what has been known as the Romantic period. To engage in a critique of the aesthetic on ideological, that is, historical and political grounds, is to deny the role of the aesthetic in enabling that critique since such an act is undertaken in the interest of overcoming the aesthetic—in the same way that the political and pedagogical artist of Schiller would overcome the limitations of the work of the artisan and the artist of beauty. At precisely the moment that Romanticism would be subject to such a critique for its fostering of the aesthetic, the critical-aesthetic project of Schiller has successfully transmitted its lesson that the political owes its critical power to the aesthetic whose law is never to represent its law. To the extent that this law legitimizes the critical activity, it also legitimizes Romanticism at the very moment of its critical rejection. This situation is an essential aspect of a modernity whose critical vocation is the legitimation of a political freedom which, like politics and Schiller's perfect work of art, ought to be meaningful to all. To engage in a critique of this project, it would first be necessary to open the question of a critique of the violence through which the aesthetic legitimizes itself. To engage in this critique is to risk, as Schiller has done, a politics that can only be defined and only judged by its success in concealing its own violence. Here, de Man's remark, with which this paper began, also faces its most difficult challenge: the challenge of ignoring a history and a politics that remains inseparable from the critical necessity that underwrites our understanding of literature since the advent of Romanticism, the necessity of the aesthetic. To accept this challenge is, however, to entertain the end of Romanticism and, with it, the end of the concept of freedom through which our history and our politics is tirelessly refracted.

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Notes

¹ Beauty, as an aesthetic category, has also had the same role. Like beauty before it, violence has now become one of our self-evident truths serving as both the means and the purpose of criticism. This indicates, at the very least, that violence and beauty both fulfill a critical function quite apart from what they may designate, a function that may be fulfilled by yet another legitimating term.

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² On this complicity in de Man, see Warminski, 9-10.

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³ Although the following passage will not be cited in the ensuing discussion of Schiller, it reflects the extent to which the founding gesture of the aesthetic state recalls from the perspective of that state an event of originary differentiation: "As long as man, in that first physical state, is merely a passive recipient of the world of sense, i.e., does no more than feel, he is still completely One with that world; and just because he is himself nothing but world, there exists for him as yet no world. Only when, at the aesthetic stage, he puts it outside himself, or *contemplates* it, does his personality differentiate itself from it, and a world becomes manifest to him because he has ceased to be one with it." (Letter 25; p.183).

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⁴ De Man also emphasizes this relation of *Trieb* and the aesthetic when he begins his discussion of Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* by referring to kinds of *Trieb* in Schiller (*sinnlicher Trieb* and *Formtrieb*). See, "Kant and Schiller," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, 147-48. On the complicity of ideological criticism with the object of its critique, the aesthetic, see Ferris, 58-59.

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⁵ See, Benjamin, "Work of Art", 269-270.

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⁶ "We are ourselves the authors of a tragedy, the finest and the best that we know how to make. In fact, our whole state has been constructed as the imitation of a noble and perfect life; that is what we hold in truth to be the most real of tragedies." (Plato, *Laws*, 817b1-5)

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⁷ Kant is absolutely clear on the intractability of this difficulty when he writes: "We can accomplish no more than to annul the conflict between the claims and counterclaims of taste" (*Critique of Judgment*, 213; translation modified.)

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⁸ In this respect, Schiller is not simply a misreader of Kant. Schiller may lack the higher degree of conceptual consistency exhibited by Kant but this in no way prevents him from developing the political, aesthetic and critical consequences of Kant's own critical undertaking.

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⁹ In describing how such laws are given, Schiller can only claim that they are a matter of "dictation." See pp. 3, 9, and 211.

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¹⁰ The essentially Goethean character of this uncriticizability is discussed by Walter Benjamin in the Afterword to his dissertation on Romanticism, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, pp. 178-85.

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¹¹ The Wilkinson and Willoughby translation of this sentence is misleading when it states that the problem of politics in practice is to be approached through "the *problem* of the aesthetic." As interesting as this translation might be, it does have to be stated that, for Schiller, the solution is not a problem.

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¹² On this deception see Ferris, 58-59.

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¹³ Schiller states: "All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of character—but how under the barbarous constitution is character ever to become ennobled? To this end we should, presumably, have to seek out some instrument not provided by the State, and to open up living springs which, whatever the political corruption, would remain clear and pure. . . . This instrument is fine art: such living springs are opened up in its immortal exemplars." (Letter 9, 55).

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¹⁴ In this case, what Schiller calls aesthetic determinability, is the means by which the law that cannot be represented is represented. Aesthetic determinability is defined as follows in Letter 21: "The mind (*Gemüt*) may be said to be determinable simply because it is not determined at all; but it is also determinable inasmuch as it is determined in a way that does not exclude anything, i.e., when the determination it undergoes is of a kind which does not involve limitation. The former is mere indetermination (it is without limits because it is without reality); the latter is aesthetic determinability (it has limits, because it embraces all reality)." (145).

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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

Shelley's Pod People

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The reader of Shelley's poetry repeatedly comes upon beautiful slumbering human forms that exist in charged non-relation to a social world. These forms suggest a fantasy of "the aesthetic" as that which is radically closed to human concerns. The Shelley circle's posthumous constructions of "Shelley" as one who is not of this world are informed by an attentive reading of Shelley's poetic figures, including figures of the aesthetic as that which does not matter in terms of human economies of desire and exchange. This essay appears in *_Volume Title_*, a volume of *_Romantic Circles Praxis Series_*, prepared exclusively for Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>), University of Maryland.

1. A certain shape recurs in Shelley's verse—a beautiful, slumbering human form. In Canto 10 of *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon discovers such forms amidst the ruins of a maddened civilization:

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Sometimes the living by the dead were hid.
Near the great fountain by the public square,
Where corpses made a crumbling pyramid
Under the sun, was heard one stifled prayer
For life, in the hot silence of the air;
And strange 'twas, amid that hideous heap to see
Some shrouded in their long and golden hair,
As if not dead, but slumbering quietly
Like forms which sculptors carve, then love to agony.[\[1\]](#)

The stanza adumbrates three classes of being: the living, the dead, and the "as if not dead"—bodies suspended in and shrouded by their own nimbus, preserved intact within the wreckage. It is "strange" to find these hermetic figures here. They seem to insist on their radical extraneousness to human concern, on the way in which they simply do not matter—to the plot of this poem, to the scene in which they are posited. Yet that very insistence seems to place them in some relation—or charged non-relation—to the overtly social landscape in which they slumber.

2. True aliens, these pod people only simulate the natural human body. They are also only "like" Romantic works of art, whether conventionally understood as expressing and inciting human passion, or rendered by Shelley as "seeds" and "dead leaves" that slumber, dormant, until futurity unlooses their incendiary social potential. Where these images are identified with motion, mutability, transference—the movement of trope and verse itself—the perpetual dreamers of *this* passage, with their factitious, arresting glamour, resist metamorphosis, the poetic turn, and all the transformative practices and values we have come to associate with Shelley's poetry. They are thus related to a construction of "the aesthetic" that descends to us from Kant through Adorno: "the aesthetic" as autonomous, enigmatic, auratic form. The stanza could thus be seen to pose the question of the relation of the aesthetic to the social field.
3. These beautiful dreamers live a posthumous life, beyond life and death, but transcending neither. I want to suggest that they speak to a fantasy of the endurance of the poet and the poetic work, not as endlessly renewable, socially-efficacious resources, but as forms radically closed to our concerns. They

can thus be connected to an experience of Shelley's own poetry, which, however sympathetic we are with recent historicist work that insists on the poet's commitment to social and political change, can strike us as most wonderful at its most difficult and hermetic, the point where it fails to yield to our reading. They can also evoke the exquisite loveliness of Shelley himself as he appears in the accounts of his contemporaries—as the prematurely arrested figure who never was of our kind.

4. In the pages that follow I want to look at the Shelley circle's posthumous constructions of "the Poet"—the one who walks among us like a mercurial visitant from another world, and, more rarely, the closed, immobilized but equally unearthly form that slumbers forever in the hearts of those who knew him. These constructions are cultic but not naïve, I would argue. They are informed by passionate, attentive readings of Shelley's poetic figures, including figures of the aesthetic as that which adamantly refuses to matter in terms of human economies of desire and exchange. Perhaps, Shelley's ruthless Witch of Atlas suggests, the artist is most loyal to human needs and desires when his art preserves at its core a resistance to our demands.

I. Shelley's Bones

5. In 1869, when Edward Trelawny, the friend of Shelley, was in his late seventies, William Michael Rossetti, born after the poet's death, began a series of visits to him. These visits resulted in Trelawny's expansion and republication of his *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, as *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*. They resulted as well in Rossetti's delighted acquisition of a little piece of bone:

He gave me a little piece (not before seen by me) of Shelley's skull, taken from the brow: it is wholly blackened—not, like the jawbone, whitened by the fire. He has two such bits of jawbone, and three (at least) of the skull, including the one now in my possession. I must consider how best to preserve it. [cited in Crane, 339]

6. Trelawny had these bones to give away because he was himself a relic—the last survivor of the small circle who orchestrated Shelley's cremation after his drowning in Italy. By the time Rossetti met him, he had been living for some years off his stories of the poet's last days. Here is his account of his first encounter with Shelley's skull, on the beach off the Via Reggia where the drowned body had washed up:

We were startled and drawn together by a dull hollow sound that followed the blow of a mattock; the iron had struck a skull, and the body was soon uncovered. Lime had been strewn on it; this, or decomposition, had the effect of staining it of a dark and ghastly indigo colour. [Records, 211]

Attended by Leigh Hunt and Lord Byron, and assisted by a host of Italian officials, Trelawny proceeded to move the corpse onto a funeral pyre and to repeat the ceremony that had been performed for Shelley's friend Williams the day before:

After the fire was well kindled we repeated the ceremony of the previous day; and more wine was poured over Shelley's dead body than he had consumed during his life. This with the oil and salt made the yellow flames glisten and quiver. The heat from the sun and fire was so intense that the atmosphere was tremulous and wavy. The corpse fell open and the heart was laid bare. The frontal bone of the skull, where it had been struck with the mattock, fell off; and, as the back of the head rested on the red-hot bottom bars of the furnace, the brains literally seethed, bubbled and boiled as in a cauldron, for a very long time. . . . The only portions that were not consumed were some fragments of bones, the

jaw, and the skull; but what surprised us all was that the heart remained entire. In snatching this relic from the fiery furnace, my hand was severely burnt; and had any one seen me do the act I should have been put in quarantine. [*Records*, 212-13]

The fire consumes the elaborate machinery Trelawny has mobilized to produce this spectacle on a recalcitrant, modern landscape: in the end, all that stays with us is the boiling, fabulous body, with its unorchestrated energies, utterly transfigured into something rich and strange—into the elusive, ungraspable figure of poetic genius.

7. Or almost utterly. There is the matter of the bones and the heart that refuse to burn. These become "relics," parts to which accrue the magic of the lost one—like manuscripts, locks of hair, portraits, biographical anecdotes, other things that originate in physical proximity to the dead person. "Relics" can stand, or stand in, for the lost body itself, in the way a fragment can come to stand for the projected shape of a lost work or corpus. The heart acquired these latter values in the course of its afterlife, which began when Trelawny gave it at the cremation to Leigh Hunt, who begged it of him; Mary Shelley then wanted it, but the uncharacteristically unchivalrous Hunt wouldn't give it up until after some weeks of negotiation. The heart was then encrypted in a locked drawer of Mary Shelley's writing desk, folded in a page of *Adonais*, where it was discovered after her death and buried. Leigh Hunt, in the meantime, ever after mourned and eulogized its loss: "Cor Cordium," or heart of hearts, is the epitaph he put on Shelley's tombstone; "Let those who have known such hearts and lost them judge of the sadness of his friends," he writes in Shelley's obituary.^[2]
8. Like Rossetti, who wondered "how best to preserve" his bit of bone, these lovers of Shelley had the passion of collectors and hoarders. But what of Trelawny, who snatched these remains from the fiery furnace only to give them away? He reminds us that the labor of the circle is twofold: to collect the pieces, and to put them back into circulation. An adventurer who gave up a career at sea to follow the poets, the preserver of their deaths and their relics, Trelawny knew that these traces are the stuff of biography—little bits of material that begin in proximity to the person but only come into their full value when disseminated. If the heart, exposed in its cage, looks especially plummy, worth burning oneself for, perhaps this is less because it represents the core or essence of the biographical subject than because it is the figure of circulation. Trelawny, who tracks the metamorphic career of Shelley's body as it is drowned, buried, disinterred, burned, encrypted, and buried again, like to keep things moving: he keeps alive the "surprise" of the heart's spectacular appearance by passing it along; he keeps always a few bones in reserve, for the ever-renewed delight of the initiate. By these tactics he sustains the magic of the relic—its reference, not to the natural human body, but to the protean, otherworldly shape of the poet.
9. A professional romanticist could well find an interest in the career of Shelley's bones somewhat embarrassing: even during the nineteenth century such reliquarianism seemed a particularly excessive and dismissible manifestation of the romantic cult of genius. Yet Paul de Man's important essay "Shelley Disfigured" suggests that versions of this attachment may inform the very construction of Shelley's corpus and the entire history of his reception. In his brilliant, rigorous analysis of Shelley's "Triumph of Life," de Man identifies a poetics of disfiguration that repeatedly erodes and erases what it posits, that "warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence" ("SD" 122). Paradoxically, Shelley's literal death by drowning before finishing the poem has operated to give positive "shape"—the shape of a fragment—to a text that is better described as a performance of this negative knowledge. "[W]hat we have done with the dead Shelley, and with all the other dead bodies that appear in Romantic literature. . . is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves . . . They have been transformed into historical and aesthetic objects"

("SD" 122).

10. The cultic life of the dead Shelley might seem to be the most naïve and egregious of these monumentalizing strategies. Yet as de Man repeatedly demonstrates, it is not easy to disengage the valuative work of commemoration from the rigor of a reading. What "shape" circulates in these early accounts of Shelley? In Thomas Hogg's account of meeting Shelley at Oxford, his friend first appears as a "stranger," a visitant, who speaks with no natural voice and is animated by no natural life (*SO* 6-13). Here is Hogg describing Shelley sleeping:

. . . he would sleep from two to four hours, often so soundly that his slumbers resembled a deep lethargy; he lay occasionally upon the sofa, but more commonly stretched upon the rug before a large fire, like a cat; and his little round head was exposed to such a fierce heat, that I used to wonder how he was able to bear it. Sometimes I have interposed some shelter, but rarely with any permanent effect; for the sleeper usually contrived to turn himself, and to roll again into the spot where the fire glowed the brightest. . . . At six he would suddenly compose himself, even in the midst of a most animated narrative or of earnest discussion; and he would lie buried in entire forgetfulness, in a sweet and mighty oblivion, until ten, when he would suddenly start up, and . . . enter at once into a vehement argument, or begin to recite verses, either of his own composition or from the works of others, with a rapidity and an energy that were often quite painful. During this period of his occultation I took tea . . . [*SO* 40-41]

11. Shelley is here possessed of the charge of the poetic figure, and not just any figure, but his own as described by de Man: he is a shape all light, subject to periodic occultation; or, more fatally put, an evanescent and fading form, continually metamorphosing, vanishing, going under. In the words of William Hazlitt: "His person was a type and shadow of his genius. His complexion, fair, golden, freckled, seemed transparent with an inward light, and his spirit within him

--so divinely wrought,
That you might almost say his body thought.

He reminded those who saw him of some of Ovid's fables" (*Critical Heritage*, 336). And here is Trelawny, who in his *Records* describes his first encounter with Shelley, who simply disappears from a room of people: Trelawny asks, "Where is he?" and Jane Williams answers, "Who? Shelley! Oh, he comes and goes like a spirit, no one knows when or where" (*Records* 22). In the logic of these biographical testimonials, the drowning of this figure is merely a repetition of a characteristic disappearance. In the account of the Genovese captain who reported seeing the spectacle of the *Don Juan* in turbulent waters: "The next wave which rose between the Boat and the vessel subsided—not a splash was seen amidst the white foam of the breakers. Every trace of the boat and of its wretched crew had disappeared" (Cameron, 60).

12. The "Shelley" who appears in the memoirs of those who knew him is always on the brink of being lost. Most characteristically, he is lost in books—the natural setting for a poetic figure. The first time Trelawny meets him, he begins to read and translate Calderon: "Shoved off from the shore of commonplace incidents that could not interest him, and fairly launched on a theme that did, he instantly became oblivious of everything but the book in his hand . . . After this touch of his quality I no longer doubted his identity" (*Records* 22). Trelawny's nautical figure suggests that Shelley's immersion makes him vulnerable to drowning. This is literally true: his inability to get his nose out of his book makes him a perilous sailor. But there's also a fatal logic at work here: Narcissus-like, the poet finds and loses himself in other scenes, in landscapes that do not support human life. He's always reading, and he always gravitates toward water, and no one likes to think of the combination, particularly Trelawny,

who goes searching for him in a forest one day and stumbles upon an old man who guides him to an ominously Ovidian scene: "By-and-by the old fellow pointed with his stick to a hat, books, and loose papers lying about, and then to a deep pool of dark glimmering water, saying 'Eccolo!' I thought he meant that Shelley was in or under the water" (*Records* 103).

13. This ability to be transported lends Shelley his charm, makes him a marvelous and wonderful figure, a man like no other, according to the recollections of his friends. He seems to have inspired in them the stabbing emotion that a lover of books feels when watching the reader, the obsessive scholar, the writer, when that person seems to carry a capacity for immersion beyond all limits: a love that is an amalgam of identification, protectiveness and dread, and, no doubt, envy and rage. Such a figure seems on the one hand to be in constant need of rescue: to be reminded to come home, to eat, and periodically, to be fished out of the fire or the water. And yet one intervenes at his and one's own peril: when Shelley is sleepwalking or seeing ghosts, or when he's out in a boat over his head, one can only hold one's breath, for the merest gasp might tumble him out of the poise that sustains him. So he is kept alive by constant vigilance—the practical measures and magical thinking of the circle that forms around this mercurial stranger who does not seem to have attached himself to life.
14. It's hard to imagine that Shelley, an expert in the allure of the vanishing figure, doesn't intuit this; that there isn't an element of performance in his obliviousness to the world. This is suggested by another anecdote Trelawny tells. One day, swimming in the Arno, Trelawny "astonished the Poet by performing a series of aquatic gymnastics, which [he] had learnt from the natives of the South Seas." Shelley asks, "Why can't I swim?" Trelawny replies, "Because you think you can't," and advises him to try.

He doffed his jacket and trowsers, kicked off his shoes and socks, and plunged in; and there he lay stretched out on the bottom like a conger eel, not making the least effort or struggle to save himself. He would have been drowned if I had not instantly fished him out. When he recovered his breath, he said, 'I always find the bottom of the well, and they say Truth lies there. In another minute I should have found it, and you would have found an empty shell. It is an easy way of getting rid of the body.' [*Records* 91]

On the one hand, this story tells the usual story: of the poet careless of his cage, always ready to leave this world. But on the other hand, how else could a man who can't swim captivate a man who learned his tricks in the South Seas than by this flamboyantly staged willingness to drown? How else could a man without the will to live provoke the dramatic interventions necessary to keep him afloat? Trelawny's Shelley is a little stooped from a life of being doubled over still surfaces; but it's not always possible to know if his Narcissus posture represents an extreme of self-forgetfulness or of ruthless self-absorption. And indeed, more than any positive image of Shelley as an ideal or ethereal figure, it's that undecidability—the undecidability of a pure self-reflex—that constitutes his charm.

15. The Shelley that circulates in these early biographies is the projected phantasm of his verse: the personification of a negative knowledge and an ungraspable poetics, or, in de Man's words, "the glimmering figure [who] takes on the form of the unreachable reflection of Narcissus, the manifestation of shape at the expense of its possession" ("SD" 109). The posthumous creation of the circle that labored to give shape to the poet after his death, this glimmering figure is neither a naïve nor an escapable construction. It descends to haunt the most powerful of our modern readings of Shelley, for instance, de Man's—a haunting symptomized by de Man's gestures of figuration and his inordinate attachment to the figure that refuses to attach itself to any life supports whatsoever.
16. Death arrests this evanescent form. In death Shelley reminds Leigh Hunt of a "spirit" "found dead in a solitary corner of the earth, its wings stiffened, its warm heart cold" (Hunt ii, 105). His description

recalls the splayed skeleton found—or fabricated—by Trelawny:

Two bodies were found on shore,—one near Via Reggia, which I went and examined. The face and hands, and parts of the body not protected by the dress, were fleshless. The tall slight figure, the jacket, the volume of Aeschylus in one pocket, and Keats's poems in the other, doubled back, as if the reader, in the act of reading, had hastily thrust it away, were all too familiar to me to leave a doubt on my mind that this mutilated corpse was any other than Shelley's. [*Records* 189-90]

The stiffening of the glimmering figure into the determinate shape of the Poet recalls de Man's claim about the fate of Shelley's corpus, which "stiffens" into the rigidity of an historical and aesthetic object when read backwards through his death. Yet these descriptions of the poet's corpse suggest that "the aesthetic object"—the static, closed thing that comes to stand for art—represents less a detour from the rigors of reading than the limit-case of a Shelleyan poetics. Shelley's dead body is the formal, fixed rendering of an infinitely redoubled strategy of figuration. In death, Shelley's bones arrange themselves into the posture of the reader arrested in a moment of absorption, but too late to save himself from drowning; or, perhaps, of the reader already drowning—doubled over and lost in his book, or in the figure of the dead Keats—before death's random blow arrests him; or, even, of the reader halted before the "shape" of the dead Shelley, discovering herself already absorbed into his circle.

II. Live burial

17. Hunt's image of Shelley as a stiffened ephemeron recalls the exquisite bodies tucked away in the ruins in the stanza I began by quoting. These bodies can in turn be linked to the encrypted form that colonizes the circle after Shelley's death, causing it to stiffen into an obdurate, breakable formation. The beautiful hermetic dreamers of Shelley's poems provide a way to think about the problems attendant upon reading or mourning Shelley. How does one get hold or let go of a radically arrested figure?
18. Pod people occur throughout Shelley's work, but they are strangely insistent in *The Witch of Atlas*, Shelley's great autobiographical poem of 1820. The glamorous Witch is herself a pod person: she spends her days in a cave and her nights in a fountain or well, where she folds into a chrysalis form, a barely animated effigy of herself, recalling her author's stints as conger eel or occulted sleeper:

xxviii

This lady never slept, but lay in trance
All night within the fountain—as in sleep.
Its emerald crags glowed in her beauty's glance;
Through the green splendour of the water deep
She saw the constellations reel and dance
Like fire-flies—and withal did ever keep
The tenour of her contemplations calm,
With open eyes, closed feet and folded palm.

19. During the poem the Witch moves out of the cocooning spaces of cave, fountain, and well of fire, to set out on travels that Stuart Sperry calls "a journey without goal or quest" (*SMV* 154). But like an otherworldly Johnny Appleseed, wherever she goes she collects and sows forms that mime her own encapsulated beauty. Most strikingly, she creates a somnolent Hermaphrodite that briefly accompanies her; then, in the last movement of the poem, she follows the Nile to the seat of human civilization, where she walks by night, "scattering sweet visions" and "observing mortals in their sleep." To the most beautiful of these she gives a "strange panacea" (Ixix). When such a one dies, she unwraps the

shroud, throws the coffin into a ditch, and lays the body out:

lxxi

And there the body lay, age after age,
Mute, breathing, beating, warm and undecaying,
Like one asleep in a green hermitage,
With gentle smiles about its eyelids playing
And living in its dreams beyond the rage
Of death or life; while they were still arraying
In liveries ever new, the rapid, blind
And fleeting generations of mankind.

Thus her sports leave behind deposits—figures evocative of poets lost in their creations, of works whose contents have withdrawn into inscrutable form, and of observers absorbed in some other scene than the social landscape they inhabit—all of which have in common a posture that, borrowing from Adorno, one might call aesthetic "comportment" (AT 12).

20. The ubiquity of these withdrawn figures in *The Witch of Atlas* seems teasingly related to the text's almost complete lack of conversation, in 1820, with Shelley's ambitious, overtly political writing of 1819—a year that saw the completion of *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* and the composition of new works including *The Mask of Anarchy*, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, and "England 1819," all deeply engaged with post-Peterloo England. Indeed, we could speculate that *The Witch's* abstracted forms serve to foreground a certain absence of relation: the absence Mary Shelley protested and Percy Shelley insists on in his dedicatory stanzas "To Mary (On her objecting to the following poem, upon the score of its containing no human interest)," where he asserts that his poem tells no story and has no pretensions to an audience—it is like the kitten's objectless *jeu*, and the ephemeron that lives only for a day.[\[3\]](#)
21. In her notes to Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*, Mary Shelley returns to the scene of this disagreement. At the time, she explains, she was urging Shelley to write on "subjects that would more suit the popular taste than a poem conceived in the abstract and dreamy spirit of *The Witch of Atlas*."

It was not only that I wished him to acquire popularity as redounding to his fame; but I believed that he would obtain a greater mastery over his own powers, and greater happiness in his mind, if public applause crowned his endeavors. . . . But my persuasions were vain, the mind could not be bent from its natural inclination. Shelley shrunk instinctively from portraying human passion, with its mixture of good and evil, of disappointment and disquiet. Such opened again the wounds of his own heart; and he loved to shelter himself rather in the airiest flights of fancy, forgetting love and hate, and regret and lost hope. [PW 388-89]

The context of *The Witch of Atlas*, she suggests, is not the work of the year that preceded its composition but the professional and domestic disappointments that ushered in, plagued, and followed that burst of productivity. She's thinking no doubt of Shelley's failure to command any audience at all with his writing: by the time of *The Witch's* composition, *The Cenci* had been rejected by Covent Garden, and Ollier and Hunt were remaining silent on all the other pieces. And she hints at the private losses that marked this time: the death of William, the second of their children to die in Italy; her own subsequent depression; the death of at least one other Shelley baby and a further hardening of the couple's estrangement.[\[4\]](#) Mary identifies Shelley with his Witch: like her, he cordons off an arena of "airy fancy" within which to sport, rather than engaging "human interest." And she suggests that the mercurial play of poet, work, and poetic figure exists in some relation to the sealed-over wounds of the

heart.

22. Mary may not be right about this urbane poem, which could be said to have an uncharacteristically strong sense of audience. But she is suggestive about the Witch herself, who exists in a pointed, even comic lack of relation to human passionate life. Her first act is to bolt from the creatures who orbit in the "magic circle of her voice and eyes" (vii): she must leave, she tells them, because she is not of their kind, and not being mortal herself, she doesn't want to get attached to them only to have to suffer at their deaths (xxiii). Her problem with commitment, however, is nowhere more striking than when she abandons the "fair Shape" she herself has created out of a "repugnant mass" of "fire and snow" (xxxv):

A fair Shape out of her hands did flow—
A living Image, which did far surpass
In beauty that bright shape of vital stone
Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion.

xxxvi

A sexless thing it was . . .
The countenance was such as might select
Some artist that his skill should never die,
Imaging forth such perfect purity.

We've been reading long enough to feel a plot coming on—a version of the Pygmalion myth. This is a Shelley poem: *shouldn't* the Witch poesy be destined to fall in love with her creation, to love it perhaps "to agony"? Yet by the end of the stanzas quoted, this possibility has been closed off: the Image is a "sexless thing," and its beauty has become the preoccupation of a new artist. For the Witch herself, the Image is less an object of fixation than a way to keep moving: she peremptorily commands it to "Sit here!" in her boat (xxxvii); at her command "Hermaphroditus" (the only time it is named) it spreads its wings and flies her upstream, where she and the poem abandon it (xliii).

23. Indeed, the force of Shelley's story could be said to reside in its polemical resistance to the solutions of Pygmalion. Repelled by the "hardness" of the women of his state, the first ever to turn to prostitution, Pygmalion throws himself into his art; only when he sees and falls in love with the woman in the marble does he come to know his own desire, which the gods then fulfill (Ovid, X, 244-300). His art is thus a form of therapy, a "working through" blocked impulses until desire comes to be known and to speak, and his story belongs to a popular class of narratives of human interest—stories of the heart's efforts to know and close with its objects. It is thus "romantic," at least in terms of popular accounts of that aesthetic: the tale casts the work as expressive of the genial artist's desires and suggests its power to effect the integration of the person and the overcoming of social antagonisms through its awakening of sympathy and love.
24. If in the Pygmalion story the aesthetic object serves the interest of the human subject, in the Witch's story the created form is impervious to human needs and aims. The impediment is perhaps in the object itself. The proper name "Hermaphroditus" refers us back to another tale from *The Metamorphoses* in which latency proves to be destiny. Already bearing the stitched together names of his famously libidinal parents Hermes and Aphrodite, "Hermaphroditus," at fifteen years old, has no interest in awakening to sexual desire: the plot turns on his refusal of the nymph Salmacis, whose pool Hermaphroditus visits. Struck by his beauty, she propositions him; he rebuffs her advances; she retreats into the woods but stays to observe him; he, "as if no one were looking at him," strips and bathes in her pool; incited by his beautiful form, she jumps into the pool after him and clings to his body. When he resists her, she calls to the gods to allow her never to be parted from this youth: and so he becomes "the Hermaphrodite"—an enervated half-man, half-woman. That is, it becomes a fallen, fixed version of what he was, in a doom he may have even invited: a creature forever before or beyond sexual life

(Ovid IV, 287-390).

25. When Shelley imports this story to *The Witch of Atlas*, he suggests that the creator creates wo/man, not in her own image, but in the image of the Image. If Pygmalion falls in love with the human form he sees in the marble, the Witch's Shape is arresting for the way the marble—the formal, material dimension, the dimension of "Image" and "countenance"—swims up into the supposedly living thing. One is caught up, not by a promise of intimacy, but by an apprehension of the radical alterity of this apparitional form to human desire.^[5] The Witch's creation thus points to an "abstracting" tendency of Shelley's art, which critics have historically linked to his preoccupation with the "ideal" but which seems better described by, say, de Man's account of the poetry's strategies of "figuration." The Hermaphrodite and all the beautiful slumbering forms of *The Witch of Atlas* are adamantly unsubjectable: they refuse to satisfy, and they unmask the ruse by which a factitious, formal thing could be said to do so.
26. And yet—like Ovid's Hermaphroditus, whose flaunted unavailability incites the nymph Salmacis, and like the beautiful slumbering figure Shelley admired in the Villa Borghese,^[6] the Witch's Image is lovely, "surpassing" the beauty of Pygmalion's statue, and surely capable of becoming the object of someone's fascination if not passion:

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And ever as she went, the Image lay
With folded wings and unawakened eyes;
And o'er its gentle countenance did play
The busy dreams, and thick as summer flies,
Chasing the rapid smiles that would not stay,
And drinking the warm tears, and the sweet sighs
Inhaling, which, with busy murmur vain
They had aroused from that full heart and brain.

Indeed, the Image is here the very figure of fascination: of consciousness playing about the countenance, creating and imbibing delicate and evanescent traces of an unfathomable affective life. This sweetly and gently monstrous countenance holds us if it fails to hold the Witch, and it does so in a way that evokes what could be said to be an Ur-scene of attachment, the experience of watching the baby sleep: watching the closed, fleetingly and delicately animated face of the creature to whom it is one's destiny to become attached as it is given over to what the psychoanalysts call "hallucinatory satisfaction," its "dreams"—neither belonging to it nor exterior to it, and indistinguishable from one's own fascination—sporting over its metamorphic countenance. In this setting, the observer's love could take the form of wanting to preserve forever this fragile dream of perfect self-sufficiency; to ward off permanently the creature's awakening to a consciousness of dependency and loss, the cost of its entry into human desire, human interest, and human exchange. The purest idolatry, such love would defend the primitive magic of the image from its erosion by life.

27. Human beings never willingly give up on a libidinal position, Freud tells us; artists least of all (Freud, 133). D. W. Winnicott even contends without reference to clinical evidence that artists, as a class, are "ruthless" because they simply refuse the guilt that comes with the depressive position (Winnicott, 26). It is possible to see what critics call the Witch's "limitations"—her failure to form attachments and respond empathically to a rich, complex field of human passions—as a beautiful refusal to lose. If under the regime of "the rage of death or life" archaic dreams must be forgotten in order that generation after generation of human subjects and their labor can be efficiently cycled into the liveries of various work masters, the Witch's sport would seem to refuse and foil that killing productivity—particularly when, moving from form to form "like a sexless bee" (lxviii), she takes the most beautiful out of

circulation to deposit and abandon them in secret crypts. Her carelessness, her ruthlessness, her refusal of grief, her penchant for airy flight and her somnambulistic returns to the eerie loveliness of the abstracted human form—all derive their logic from her "defense" of poetry.

28. Thus the poem articulates a fantasy of the poet, the work, and the baby, not as sites for regenerative exchange, but as repositories that preserve magical, archaic things from a devastating human interest. This is a fantasy shared by psychoanalytic theory, which, like Shelley's circle, and like Romanticism in its highest and lowest forms, sometimes casts the artist—the one who is arrested before growing up—as a magical throwback to another dispensation, making good on our losses. In the terms of this fantasy, what we might want is not to be engaged by poetry's appeal to our passions, but rather, to preserve poetry's strange distance from human interest—to reassure ourselves that magical, hermetic poetic figures exist among us, slumbering in secret as we live out our days, entering our dreams by night, keeping alive the possibility of a ruthless, magical refusal of loss.
29. At the end of *The Witch of Atlas* the poem's somnolent forms lie suspended, "age after age," amidst a world that "rages" around them. *This* world is also a world of dreamers—misers, priests, kings, and lovers whose dreams, as a result of the witch's pranks, become parodic and utopic, unmasking "reality" itself as a collective dream. The witch finally and capriciously becomes the muse of an interventionist poetry. Yet still the figures she has encapsulated slumber on, in significant non-communication with even this transformed social field. The poem's ending suggests the insistent and perhaps founding obduracy of the "the aesthetic" to even the most admirable political visions; and it implies that art may be most loyal to humanity's dreams when it preserves, encrypted within it, a resiliently inhumane impulse—a ruthless refusal to speak to what we may only imagine are our concerns.

III. Coda: The Exquisite Corpse

30. In real life, of course, if out of idolatrous love you respect too much the capacity for hallucinatory satisfaction of babies, poems, or poets, they fail to thrive. It seems likely that both Mary and Percy Shelley suspected that this was the fate of the Shelley babies who died in Italy; it was arguably the fate of the stillborn poetry. And, psychoanalysis tells us, if a loved object dies before the work of attachment, which is also the work of letting go, is completed, the outcome is not the "working through" of mourning but a refusal to recognize loss: the magical incorporation of the object in the form of a blocking imago, in a move of "hallucinatory satisfaction." Thus the countenance of the sleeping baby who needs for nothing mirrors the exquisite corpse buried alive in the heart of the one who cannot grieve.^[7]
31. *The Witch of Atlas* was composed a year and two months after the death of William Shelley, the second of three Shelley children to die in Italy; the year anniversary of his death was marked by the death of the third, Shelley's "Neapolitan charge."^[8] The poem's embryonic, unawakened forms conjure these babies who can neither be restored to the living nor be put to rest, as well as the parents who can neither face their continued insistence nor let them die, nor puncture each other's hermetic isolation, nor independently heal the wounds of their separate hearts—in part because each holds the key to the other's sorrow. They speak to a fantasy of the body beyond sex and the engendering of life and death; and of the body that leaves encrypted babies everywhere, in the shape of quasi-aesthetic objects buried in textual graves. And they speak of the cryptic poem itself, with its aggressively flagged lack of relation to the heart's secrets.
32. It's possible to feel the pressure of these domestic circumstances in a cluster of poems from this period,

including *Epipsyichidion* and *Adonais*. In these poems, as well as in most biographical accounts of the Shelley marriage, the couple's stuck formation would seem determined by Mary Shelley's stuck mourning: she is the commissioned mourner, while he suffers indirectly when her "coldness" lays him to sleep; he could revive, he suggests half-heartedly, if only something could slake her wound.^[9] But what would it take to slake the mother's wound? She herself tells us in *Adonais*. Urania, the last to visit the corpse of her youngest born, makes an appeal to him and, indirectly, to Death (xxv):

"Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,
As silent lightning leaves the starless night!
Leave me not!" cried Urania; her distress
Roused Death: Death rose and smiled, and met her vain caress.

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"Stay yet awhile! speak to me once again;
Kiss me, so long but as a kiss may live;
And in my heartless breast and burning brain
That word, that kiss shall all thoughts else survive
With food of saddest memory kept alive,
Now thou art dead, as if it were a part
Of thee, my Adonais! I would give
All that I am to be as thou now art!
But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart!

The mother asks for one last word and one last kiss—one breach of death's seal, one instance of mutually avowed attachment—in order that she may get on with her grieving.

33. The Shelley babies in fact died in their mother's arms. But the scene anticipates Mary's experience of the loss of Percy, which had no last breaching moment; rather, the report of the mutilated corpse, the heartless breast, and the burning brain came to her from afar, to stiffen a pointed lack of relation. That report was Trelawny's, of course. After Shelley's death the circle transformed from a volatile dynamic to a formation demanding constancy and allegiance, a change blamed on Mary Shelley by Trelawny among others; historically, biographers have preferred his and Hogg's "lively" Shelley to Mary and Lady Shelley's "idealized" one.^[10] But the mercurial visitant and the stiffened form are each true, although to different experiences of loss. Trelawny, who thrusts his hand through the wall of the poet's body and delivers it of its previously enwombed form, gives birth to a Shelley possessed of a great heart, and purchases his own mobility in the process. This is the scene that Mary Shelley misses: and so she fails to escape the role of the commissioned mourner, forever constant to and immobilized by the encrypted, wounded heart and exquisite corpse.

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Notes

¹ All quotations from Shelley's poetry and M. Shelley's introductions are from *Shelley Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, new ed. G. M. Matthews (Oxford University P: London, 1970).

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² For accounts of the heart controversy, see Smith, pp. 1-2, and Hunt ii, 100-102. Hunt's obituary is reprinted in White, p. 321. For an astute account of the way the heart becomes emblematic of and imbricated in contestations about Shelley's cultural value, see Clarke, especially pp. 188-89.

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³ In *Shelley's Process*, Jerrold Hogle argues that the poem's sport—its playfully capricious relation to plot and readerly expectations—is its mode of social engagement: the poem works to break the hold of mythic narrative, including those deployed to shore up a repressive modern order (pp. 211-22). But lining and countering this play, I would argue, is the poem's proliferation of figures of the "not-in-play": images that on the one hand gesture toward an art radically incommensurable with social experience, but on the other, verge upon the sort of fixity, glamour, and ideological potency Hogle claims the poem as a whole critiques.

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⁴ For an account of this period see Holmes, Chapters 24-25.

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⁵ My discussion here is indebted to Maurice Blanchot's "Two Versions of the Imaginary."

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⁶ See Holmes, p.605.

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⁷ This is the argument of Maria Torok's "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse." My discussion here and throughout the latter part of this essay is deeply indebted to *The Shell and the Kernel*, the collection of essays by Nicholas Abraham and Torok in which Torok's essay appears.

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⁸ See Holmes, pp. 518, 596.

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⁹ See, for example, Shelley's two short poems to Mary from this time, each entitled "To Mary Shelley" (in *PW*, p. 582).

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¹⁰ For an especially virulent expression of this preference see Smith, pp. 1-36. London's "Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Spectacle of Masculinity" begins with a brief, suggestive account of the gender dynamics implicit in various representations of the poet's death.

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Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic

Response: Reading the Aesthetic, Reading Romanticism

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This essay responds to essays by Ian Balfour, David Ferris, and Karen Swann that examine the centrality of the question of the aesthetic both within Romantic studies and within the academic institution of literary and cultural criticism. These essays all, in their different ways, show that the aesthetic fulfills itself in turning against itself; that it succeeds through failure; that it ruins even as it reproduces the monumental artwork, the monumentalized artist, the psychological subject, and the space of pedagogical and political formation within which modern subjects come to pass. This essay appears in *_Volume Title_*, a volume of *_Romantic Circles Praxis Series_*, prepared exclusively for Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/>), University of Maryland.

1. The challenge, already formidable, of responding to these essays becomes all the more imposing when one returns them (as one is so often told to do these days) to their context, and recalls the fact that they form part of the ongoing work of three critics who rank among the most significant contemporary interpreters of Romantic literature. In what follows I won't try to trace filiations between the essays collected here and their authors' previous work—David Ferris's analysis of modernity, criticism, and aesthetics in his brilliant *Silent Urns*, or Ian Balfour's reading of inspiration and self-loss in his award-winning *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, or Karen Swann's meditations on form, reception, gender, and figuration in those extraordinary essays on Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats that for twenty years have taught Romanticists how richly consequential close reading can be.^[1] It will be enough to try to say something about each of the texts at hand, and about how we might read them in each other's company. Written in very different styles and taking on markedly different tasks, these three essays all affirm the centrality of the question of the aesthetic both within Romantic studies and, more generally, within the academic institution of literary and cultural criticism. They may also all three be said to exemplify the diverse legacy of deconstruction, and more particularly that of Paul de Man—and it may be that the best way to understand this legacy is as an ongoing reflection on the aesthetic. To reflect on the aesthetic is necessarily, as our authors show, to reflect on language, history, and the subject; it is to have patience with the problem of why and how powerful texts at once compel and resist reading; it is to pause over the uncertain mutual imbrications of textuality and psychic and political life. Nothing more distant from the banal misreading of the aesthetic as an apolitical "aestheticism" can be imagined than the arguments to be found in these essays. Rising to the challenge of their difficult subject matter, these texts return us, in their different ways, to the skewed, double character of the aesthetic and its privileged period-metaphor, "Romanticism."^[2] The aesthetic fulfills itself in turning against itself; it succeeds through failure; it ruins even as it reproduces the monumental artwork, the monumentalized artist, the psychological subject, and the space of pedagogical and political formation within which modern subjects come to pass.

I.

2. David Ferris, in "Aesthetic Violence and the Legitimacy of Reading Romanticism," mounts for inspection de Man's analysis of aesthetic education as founded in a violence it must also conceal. Ferris suggests that historicist approaches that treat literature as a more or less transparent window onto a social and historical landscape—approaches that imagine themselves light-years away from de Man's concerns or formulations—depend upon the possibility of recognizing such violence. The complication here is that, in setting out to locate a failure of ideology, a moment when the labor of aesthetic concealment falters or goes awry, criticism repeats the trajectory of aesthetic education itself.

For, in "failing to conceal its concealment of violence," the aesthetic opens the space of a criticism that must always be in complicity with the aesthetic.

3. Ferris locates in criticism the possibility of the political itself, insofar as the political, in coming into being, must criticize and set itself against some other politics. He is thus led to claim that modernity produces itself through an ongoing reproduction of the very category—the aesthetic—from which, in the name of critique, it claims to separate itself: the contemporary rush to reduce the aesthetic to ideology occurs in the name of aesthetico-political goals—the formation of self, community, and state. "To speak of the aesthetic in these terms," Ferris observes, "is to speak of a historical unfolding governed by a critical project unable to authorize itself by critique alone, even by the invocation of a violence within its own operation." It is this excess within criticism that historicist criticism seeks to evade, through the hyperbolically aesthetic gesture of imagining the abolition, through criticism, of the aesthetic. The aesthetic becomes the *impensée*, the encrypted and cherished secret, of historicist-political criticism. Thus a "critical project unable to authorize itself through criticism alone" masks its predicament by transforming the uncriticizability of the aesthetic into the unconscious of its practice, thereby refusing to recognize its failure to recognize failure.
4. In the second half of his paper, Ferris reads passages from Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* in order to develop and clarify the aesthetic's relation to politics. Drawing attention to a footnote to Letter 20, Ferris examines Schiller's version of the Kantian identification of the aesthetic with a harmony between freedom and law: the laws of the aesthetic, Schiller tells us, are not represented (*vorgestellt*). Aesthetic education is nothing less than a process of recognizing the aesthetic's unrepresentable laws, the unrepresentability of which removes them from the reach of criticism. Historicist criticism, which is at bottom a thoroughgoing aestheticism, transforms the aesthetic into that-which-cannot-come-to-representation, thereby securing the political by way of an uncriticizable law. Thus the aesthetic secretes and assures the power it posits: a power that achieves force of law precisely as the uncriticizable, and achieves this through failure (the failure of the aesthetic law to be represented). This is a difficult moment in Ferris's essay, since the "failure" he notes here seems to be the opposite of the aesthetic's "failure" to conceal its violence that he was discussing earlier: here the law *cannot* come to representation, whereas earlier, the violence of the aesthetic *had* to come to representation (or more precisely, to recognition; but even the recognition of a non-representation demands a certain *manifestation* of this non-representability). Both imperatives are perhaps more ambiguous than they may seem at first. The aesthetic's claim to recognize its originary violence was in a sense an illusion, since the aesthetic was simply recognizing itself, thereby establishing itself through failure. And the aesthetic's claim to recognize its laws as unrepresentable (and therefore uncriticizable) is also in a sense an illusion, since, as Ferris will soon show, this unrepresentability can immediately be read as, once again, violence.
5. At this point Ferris turns to a famous passage in Letter 4 of the *Aesthetic Education*, where Schiller contrasts the artist or artisan with the politician. The artisan uses his material with overt violence; the artist, who manipulates his material just as violently, "will seek to deceive the eye," as Schiller says, and conceal this violence; but the politician, whose material, "man," is also his goal, may *not* use violence. The political or pedagogical artist must exclude violence altogether. And as Ferris comments, adding a skeptical twist to Schiller's sequence, "the political state in which true freedom occurs is then one in which the concealment of the artist is concealed to the point of appearing not to exist." Thus, "the emergence of the political artist, the artist of the state, is then the emergence of the position from which all art can be criticized as an essentially violent undertaking because it is essentially aesthetic.... This is why Schiller can only speak of true political freedom as the perfect work of art: it lacks the violence that renders art imperfect, or, to put this bluntly, it is more successful in hiding art's concealment of its violence since the law that guides it is without representation." The art of politics is the concealment of the concealment of art; it is the presumptively non-violent moment "in

which the critique of violence is established." Consequently, "the political critique of the aesthetic is hopelessly compromised from its inception since it is already part of an aesthetic project it has forgotten how to remember." Ferris concludes by sharpening his critique of the debate current in the United States around the period-term "Romanticism." To reject Romanticism as the aesthetic is endlessly to "legitimize Romanticism at the very moment of its critical rejection." And to engage in a genuine critique of this predicament is to risk repeating the Schillerian paradigm. "Here, de Man's remark...also faces its most difficult challenge: the challenge of ignoring a history and a politics that remains inseparable from the critical necessity that underwrites our understanding of literature since the advent of Romanticism, the necessity of the aesthetic." This challenge would be that of "entertain[ing] the end of Romanticism, and, with it, the end of the concept of freedom through which our history and our politics is refracted."

6. Ferris's powerful reading raises more issues than I can address here; let me point to what I take to be one or two significant complications suggested by his closing sentences. Throughout, his emphasis on the complicity between aesthetics and the critique of aesthetic violence finds validation in his own text's highly self-conscious critical performance: Ferris must repeat the gesture he critiques as he "recognizes" the concealment of the concealment of violence that is aesthetics as politics (which is to say, aesthetics *per se*, in its fullest Schillerian development). When he suggests in his closing lines that we could "ignore" this politico-critical "necessity," I take him to be compacting the aporia he has encountered into a vibrantly ambiguous phrase. As we all know from our personal as well as our professional lives, the act of "ignoring" someone involves considerable violence; even the act of ignoring *something* can be fraught with aggression, denial, and phantasmatic projection. And if we are ignoring a "necessity," we are as likely as not to fall, like Thales, flat on our face—for, as the verb itself tells us in its circulation through various Latin-influenced European languages, *to ignore* is always possibly *to be ignorant of*.^[3] We will never be sure whether or not we have succeeded in ignoring the aesthetic because we will never be able to control our ignorance of the aesthetic—which is also to say that the violence of our ignorance is likely to fall short of cathartic or sacrificial violence. And such, I take it, is Ferris's point. The "end" of Romanticism may in this sense turn out to be, like art in Hegel, a thing of the past that has also, paradoxically, never quite arrived.

II.

7. In her subtle reading of "Shelley's Pod People," Karen Swann draws attention to those strange, beautiful human forms one encounters now and then in Shelley's poetry: figures suspended between life and death, within landscapes of wreckage and loss. They resist motion and transference and "the movement of trope and verse itself," and they speak to "a fantasy of the endurance of the poet and the poetic work...as forms radically closed to our concerns." Swann links these figures to the labor of mourning and consecration that went into the making of "Shelley" by his circle of intimates, both before and after his death. Noting that "it is not easy to disentangle the valuative work of commemoration from the rigor of a reading," she elaborates Paul de Man's severe emphasis on aesthetic monumentalization into a rich reading of the kind of biographical material—memoirs, anecdotes, letters—that is so often marshalled as an antidote to textual complexity. Swann shows us how Shelley is figured *as* a figure in these biographical accounts: as a shape all light, volatile, vulnerable, yet also unreachable and not entirely of this world, "always on the brink of being lost." Lost in books, lost to and in the world, he is at once infinitely vulnerable and ruthlessly self-absorbed. "The posthumous creation of the circle that labored to give shape to the poet after his death, this glimmering figure is neither a naive nor an escapable construction," Swann affirms. "It descends to haunt the most powerful of our modern readings of Shelley, for instance, de Man's—a haunting symptomized by de Man's gestures of figuration and his inordinate attachment to the figure that refuses to attach itself to any life supports whatever."

8. The analogous figures within Shelley's poetry, Swann proposes, at once elicit and represent our fascination with them. They preserve "magical archaic forms from a devastating human interest," and offer a "ruthless, magical refusal of loss." At once "a fantasy of the poet, the work, and the baby," this glimmering body is also "the exquisite corpse buried alive in the heart of the one who cannot grieve." For to refuse loss is also to encrypt and cherish a wound beyond all healing. Aesthetic monumentalization is at once loss and the refusal of loss; mourning and a failure to mourn; Mary Shelley's grieving heart and Edward Trelawny's vigorous trade in relics (of which the first and most memorable, of course, was the poet's literal heart). We cherish and are held within the grip of this fascination: "In death, Shelley's bones arrange themselves into the posture of the reader arrested in a moment of absorption, but too late to save himself from drowning; or, perhaps, of the reader already drowning...or, even, of the reader halted before the 'shape' of the dead Shelley, discovering herself already absorbed into his circle." Swann's lyrical and acute reading asks us to dwell with the possibility that it is "the radical alterity of this apparitional form to human desire" that entraps and fascinates us. Perhaps, she affirms, echoing Adorno, "art may be most loyal to humanity's dreams when it preserves, encrypted within it, a resiliently inhumane impulse—a ruthless refusal to speak to what we may only imagine are our concerns."[\[4\]](#)

III.

9. Ian Balfour's "Subjecticity" emphasizes the way Kantian aesthetics and Romantic writing generally render inadequate psychological and individualist notions of the subject. Through readings of Kant, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth he works to "conceive of a subjectivity beyond the subject, of something we might call 'subjecticity'." His title marks and deforms the subject with the stroke of a typo, a *coquille*, the semi-random byproduct of the workings of technological reproduction; his thesis is that "Romanticism, broadly understood, can be said to trouble the reduction of the subject to the merely subjective," even though Romanticism has also "promoted that somewhat newfangled thing called the subject." This double bind finds its most concentrated expression in the domain of the aesthetic. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is radically singular, a matter of feeling rather than conceptual thought; on the other hand, aesthetic judgment claims universal assent, and it does so via a detour through language. Judging something beautiful or sublime, "we believe ourselves," Kant writes, "to be speaking with a universal voice, [*allgemeine Stimme*]." Language, Balfour suggests, comes in to rescue aesthetics from its antinomy, facilitating the movement from singular to universal and transforming the subject of aesthetics into "something more and other than the simply subjective"; yet language proves a quagmire into which the "I" of the subject sinks, unable to speak itself except by obliterating itself. This predicament of aesthetic judgment surfaces elsewhere in the discourse of Romanticism as the self-loss of the "poetical character" in Keats, the uncertain agency of the inspired imagination in Shelley, the haunted and redoubled narrative voice of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. "Shuttling between the poles of the two main and not particularly compatible senses of 'subject,'" Balfour summarizes, "this poetic subject is better thought along the lines of 'subjecticity' than 'subjectivity,' if the latter term connotes an individualized, and largely conscious discourse of an individual subject."
10. One might dwell a little longer on the term *subjecticity*. Balfour offers it as a "word that is not exactly a word," a "non-word" and a "neologism"; but it is arguably both less and more than that. It fails to appear in dictionaries but "one can find instances of it through a Google search, mainly in the context of linguistics" (Balfour, endnote 1). That is not really surprising, since its morphology is unexceptional: "ivity" and "icity" are alternative suffixes for Latin words with stems ending in *c* (e.g., *mendax*, *mendacis*; thence, mendacity), and though *subjecticity* rings in our ears as the sort of barbarism we're used to encountering in the writing of social scientists and undergraduates, it is not quite a non-word, not *simply* improper or wrong. It wavers in the gray area between proper and improper speech, and in that sense could be said to be a bit "more" than a mere neologism.

11. Yet Balfour's discussion implies that it is also a bit "less." Whereas a neologism is normally understood to be a new word formed consciously, by a subjectivity in possession of itself and its language, in Balfour's essay *subjecticity* falls into play possibly by accident: "It could have been a typo, in this word that is not exactly a word: subjecticity." On one level, of course, we are being teased. So you thought it was a typo (and an egregious lapse in editorial proofreading) as you read Balfour's title? Or even if you didn't: you always *possibly* did. The joke, if it is one, lasts only a moment; but the punch line resonates through Balfour's essay. "It could have been" a typo—a blow from outside, deforming language and derailing the subject's intention. This kind of outside, however, is also always an inside: "The 'c' is so close to the 'v' on the keyboard that one could always type one for the other." Throughout his essay Balfour hints at the inseparability of language from its technologies of production and reproduction: the keyboard; the Internet and its technologies of search and retrieval; the technical reproducibility of experience itself in science fiction (Balfour, note 6)—which last, if fantastic, is in one sense no more than a lurid trope for the way our most intimate ("romantic") self-expressions are the most vulnerable to repetition, cliché, and literary encoding. Language has always been our exemplary *techne*, above all when it seems to be doing things beyond subjective or semantic control—doing things, that is, by "accident." The relation of the QWERTY keyboard layout to English-language morphology and its rules for generating suffixes is a non-relation, a sheer metonymy; yet here, by chance (or fate? or neither?) the exteriority of the typo has become teasingly indistinguishable from the interiority of the language. It could have been a typo—but maybe not.
12. Such undecidable moments, when accident and form threaten to become impossible to hold apart, can inspire aggressive efforts to stabilize oppositions (a typo!) and fix blame (can't Balfour, Redfield, Pyle, and Orrin Wang and his staff *read*?). Yet they can also inspire thought: the kind of thinking about Romanticism, language, technics, mourning, and subjecticity that these three essays offer us. It is the kind of thinking that we may best call reading: reading as the effort to read the predicament—the fascination, the difficulty, the aporia or possible impossibility—of reading itself. If that theme, particularly though by no means only in Romantic studies, bears the signature of Paul de Man, these three essays demonstrate both how differently the theme of reading reading can be written and read, and how diversely this theme's recurrent motifs can manifest themselves. For it cannot be doubted that certain motifs recur: a violence or catastrophe at the origin of signification; a text's constitutive openness to accident; a reader's consequent inability to weigh her ignorance, hold herself apart from the text, or avoid repeating its error. This "wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts" (de Man, 120) can leave its mark as a typo (Balfour); as the "formal material dimension" of the image "swim[ming] up into the supposedly living thing" (Swann); as "a historical unfolding governed by a critical project unable to authorize itself by critique alone, even by the invocation of a violence within its own operation" (Ferris). Thus, in their various ways, these essays locate the aesthetic as the place where the seductions and problems of reading emerge most tellingly, and suggest that the uncertain, conflicted phenomenon that we go on stubbornly calling "Romanticism" continues to have so much to tell us precisely because it names a literary-historical displacement of the aesthetic.

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Notes

¹ See the bibliography for the full publication data of Ferris's and Balfour's books, and a sampling of Swann's essays.

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² On Romanticism as a period-metaphor inseparable from the discourse of aesthetics, see my *Politics of Aesthetics*.

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³ The French verb *ignorer*, for instance, means "to be ignorant of."

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⁴ "Art is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it" (Adorno, 197).

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