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EUROPEAN ROMANTICISM

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I: A Problematic Concept

Attempts to define Romanticism characteristically begin by conceding the difficulty, even impossibility, of the task. The entry on the subject in an encyclopedia of German literary history summarizes the challenge: "The Romantic movement must be understood as a unity, but it is in itself so polymorphous and contradictory that both a definition and an historical presentation are extraordinarily difficult."[1] Rather than proposing a normative definition, as if that were possible, this chapter will take the resistance to definition and its historical roots as keys to understanding Romanticism as distinctly European and modern. Accordingly, the focus here will be less on the art produced during the early decades of the nineteenth century, when Romanticism began to be theorized as a contemporary concern, than on discursive self-understanding in that unsettled period in which, as the poet William Wordsworth acknowledged, "a shock had then been given / To old opinions; and the minds of all men / Had felt it."[2]

Inaugurating modern scholarship on the subject in 1870, Rudolf Haym argued that "to investigate the essence of Romanticism from a purely historical position [*in rein historischer Haltung*]" had become possible because it lay over half a century in the past – by Haym's account, in the circle of the Schlegel brothers (August Wilhelm and Friedrich), Ludwig

[1] Lüthi, p. 578.

[2] *The Prelude* 10.860–62, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 342.

Tieck, and F. W. J. Schelling in the university town of Jena.[3] Many others, however, have questioned whether there ever was such a thing as Romanticism. Indeed, from its earliest articulations the concept of Romanticism has been haunted by a sense of its lack of correspondence to empirical reality. Thus the Russian poet Pyotr Andreyevich Vyazemsky complained in 1824, "Romanticism [*Romantizm*] is like a phantom. Many people believe in it; there is a conviction that it exists, but where are its distinctive features, how can it be defined, how can one put one's fingers on it?"[4]

The perceived elusiveness of Romanticism itself is due largely to the diversity of the of the intellectual and artistic phenomena – in literature, music, the visual arts, philosophy, even science – to which the *term* has been applied, across most European nations. In some, like Germany and France, the identification of Romantic "schools" was contemporaneous, whereas in others, like Britain, it was retrospective. When contemporaneous, these identifications could be admiring, as in E. T. A. Hoffmann's appreciation of Beethoven's instrumental music, or pejorative, as in the classicist J. H. Voss's polemics against the culturally nationalistic poets Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. To be sure, there are clichés about Romanticism which have acquired a quasi-normative status through repetition in reference works: it is subjectivist and individualist, rejects rationalism for sensationalism and emotionalism, celebrates artistic imagination and originality, privileges authentic feeling and spontaneous expression over technique and form, prefers nature to society, condemns tradition and convention while promoting revolution (in thought and art if not in politics), is visionary and idealist, is nostalgic and melancholy. Apart from the obvious contradictions among them, such clichés derive mostly from manifestos of the early nineteenth century, written by those for whom Romanticism (or something subsequently to be called that) was a

[3] Haym, p. 4. See also Halmi, "Romanticism," p. 365.

[4] Quoted and translated by McLaughlin, p. 418.

cause to be espoused or opposed; and thus they cannot be considered neutrally descriptive. One cautionary example: in musical Romanticism, conventionally associated with the generation of Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Berlioz, "emotional and picturesque expression" is supposed to have been "more important than formal or structural considerations" – yet this same generation saw the first systematic publication of Bach's works and regarded his technique as "a model . . . for the whole of music."[5]

The endlessly lamented wide application of the term *Romanticism* and its cognates in many European languages is due in turn to the co-existence, or rather the frequent fusion, of two *concepts* of Romanticism, one historical and the other typological. Already in the earliest history of Romanticism, Eugène Ronteix (publishing under an anagrammatic pseudonym) maintained simultaneously that it was a rebellious tendency "in every century, in every epoch," rejecting conventional ideas and established forms, and a contemporary artistic movement fathered in France by François-René de Chateaubriand in 1801, adopted by Germaine de Staël thereafter, and attaining maturity with Lord Byron and Victor Hugo in the 1820s.[6] But while a purely historical classification must include heterogeneous phenomena by virtue of their contemporaneity, a purely typological classification must exclude contemporaneous phenomena by virtue of their heterogeneity. When, therefore, both classificatory criteria are applied at once, the result is a Romanticism whose constituents are not all Romantics – a club worthy of Groucho Marx's membership.

Prominent literary critics have been entangled in this paradox when they have tried to define Romanticism normatively. In articles first published in 1949 and 1963, René Wellek forcefully countered the intellectual historian A. O. Lovejoy's argument that, in the absence of any common denominator among all the phenomena labelled *Romanticism*, it was best to

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[5] Kennedy, p. 737 (s.v. "Romantic(ism)"); Rosen, p. 7.

[6] Ronteix, pp. 6–7, 10–11, 17, 390.

speak of a plurality of Romanticisms.[7] But although Wellek affirmed "the unity of European Romanticism" on the basis of three *generic* characteristics – "imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style" – his choice of examples presupposed the validity of the conventional *chronological* designations of Romanticism in various European literatures as well as of the consensus among literary historians that Romanticism in the aggregate extended roughly from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.[8] Consequently, Wellek's three criteria could exclude some writers within a given Romantic period (as he conceded with regard to Byron) and include others outside it. Similarly, having defined Romanticism as the early nineteenth-century "secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking," the critic M. H. Abrams was compelled to omit the skeptical and ironic Byron from his account, despite the fact that the poet was widely regarded after his death in 1824 as having epitomized Romanticism.[9]

Given the obstacles to defining Romanticism holistically, historians and critics have largely, if tacitly, followed Lovejoy's advice to distinguish Romanticisms and investigate each as a more or less self-contained complex. Focusing on the species – a Romanticism delimited nationally, geographically, linguistically, temporally, politically, or some other way – allows one to elide the genus while conforming to current disciplinary boundaries. In some disciplines it is acceptable even to distinguish contemporaneous Romanticisms centered on particular social networks: thus Anglisticists classify Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as "first-generation" and Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats as "second-generation" Romantic poets (the latter having differentiated themselves poetically and

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[7] Lovejoy, pp. 235–37.

[8] Wellek, "Concept," pp. 160–61; "Romanticism," pp. 200–1.

[9] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 12–13.

politically from the former), while Germanists distinguish Romanticisms both chronologically ("early", "high", and "late") and geographically (Jena, Berlin, Heidelberg, and Dresden).[10] Yet since the obvious expedient of abandoning the term *Romanticism* altogether, proposed already by Wilhelm Dilthey,[11] has never found favor, its apparent indispensability suggests a persistent sense that it designates something tangible to which all the differentiated Romanticisms are related, even if they are not necessarily compatible with one another.

II: Ambivalent Modernity

Neither Lovejoy's nominalism nor Wellek's realism could reconcile the heterogeneity of historically attested uses of the word *Romanticism* in multiple languages with a unitary concept of European Romanticism. But there is no need to sacrifice one for the sake of the other if, as Christoph Bode proposes, we recognize in that very heterogeneity the solution to the problem of definition. For Bode, the commonality among "Romanticisms" is to be found not in their content but in their *point de départ*, a set of conditions that he generalizes as "the ever-accelerating modernization of European society."[12] Conceptualizing European

[10] Defending the geographical subgrouping, Ziolkowski insists, "The mythologizing works of the Heidelbergers are just as 'romantic' as the Jena theoretical works and the Berlin historical works, but in a completely different way" (p. 3).

[11] Dilthey, p. 202.

[12] Bode, "Europe," p. 127, and "Romantik," p. 90. See also the collection *Romanticism in National Context*, which according to its editors seeks "to elucidate how the diverse [national] Romanticisms took shape under the influence of the epochal upheavals that were shaking the foundations of the whole of Europe, the French Revolution and the British Industrial Revolution" (Porter and Teich, pp. 2–3). Insisting that Romanticism must be

Romanticism thus as a network of responses to shared historical challenges allows us not only to accommodate the diversity of those responses, but to recognize the source of the tension between historical and typological accounts of Romanticism – more specifically, the sense that neither alone is fully adequate to its object – in the eighteenth century.

What were those challenges? Although this chapter is concerned with intellectual rather than semantic history, the early uses of the English word *romantic* (followed by its cognates in other European languages) are worth considering briefly because they illustrate an ambivalence that extended both to later applications of the word and more generally to nineteenth-century historical thought. Deriving from the noun *romance*, a popular narrative form of contested generic and moral status, the adjective is first attested in the mid-seventeenth century, when its meaning was "as in romances," with the connotations of fantasticality, extravagance, even absurdity.[13] These connotations reflected a recognition of historical distance from the conventions of chivalric romance and at least an implicit conviction of the form's obsolescence. But by the early eighteenth century the adjective, without losing its original sense, was also being applied, with an increasingly positive valence, to the kind of natural scenery – irregular and seemingly untamed – associated with the wildernesses and enchanted landscapes represented in classical and medieval literature, especially epics and romances. For although the "fantastic beings" of older poetry could no longer be used plausibly by modern poets, as Thomas Warton lamented in the first large-scale

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examined exclusively "in a social and historical context," Löwy and Sayre define it as an anti-capitalist *Weltanschauung* (pp. 18, 30).

[13] Immerwahr, pp. 17–22. See also the annotated chronology in Eichner, *"Romantic" and Its Cognates*, pp. 501–13. The initial French and German equivalents, *romanesque* and *romanisch*, date from the same period; *romantisch* and *romantique* followed at the end of the seventeenth century but became well established only in the eighteenth.

literary history, the woods and grottoes and caverns those beings had inhabited could be recreated by landscape architects in what became known throughout Europe as "English gardens."[14]

Thus by the middle of the century the adjective *romantic* was capable of performing opposing functions, designating on the one hand the outdated literature of a more credulous age, and on the other the aesthetically appealing manifestations of "savage" nature in the modern world. From the original, historical sense of *romantic* was derived a second, typological sense. This latter meaning, which at once appropriated and transcended temporal specificity, entailed a critique of the very modernity that the historical sense presupposed. Designating the reassuring reminders (however fake) of the untamed nature and unfettered imagination that modernity was supposed to have overcome definitively, the typologically romantic was the aesthetic counterpart to Rousseau's moral argument that "our souls have been corrupted to the same extent that our Sciences and our Arts have advanced towards perfection."[15] Relegating the romantic to the past was to affirm a sense of modernity as the progress of reason; reviving the romantic, if only in simulacra of the past, was to concede that that progress was not achieved without losses, particularly of traditional beliefs and values.

The ambivalent modernity revealed by the early uses of the word *romantic* became more pronounced in the late eighteenth century as questions of historical self-definition began to present themselves more urgently. The impetus for those questions cannot be reduced to specific socio-economic or political processes such as the transition from a feudal to a commercial economy, industrialization, urbanization, the economic and political self-assertion of the bourgeoisie, the growth of literacy, the development of a "public sphere," or the emergence of the nation-state as the principal political unit. For one thing these processes,

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[14] Warton, vol. I, p. 486; Immerwahr, pp. 20–45.

[15] Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), pt. 1, *Œuvres*, vol. III, p. 7.

although of major importance in certain nations, did not occur equally or simultaneously across Europe, and for another Romanticism was discussed and Romantic movements were proclaimed or retrospectively identified in lands with widely different economies, social structures, and political arrangements, from Britain to Spain to Hungary to Russia. To be sure, the beginning of the *period* of European Romanticism is typically dated to the French Revolution, and there is no question that the twenty-three years of war (1792–1815) unleashed by the Revolution affected the whole of the continent. Yet in crucial respects post-Napoleonic political and economic conditions differed little from those before the Revolution, for "the land-owning elites were still firmly in charge of even the most advanced countries [and] the overwhelming majority of Europeans were still illiterate peasants."[16]

What is striking, however, is that almost from its beginning, well before Napoleon's *coup d'état* of 1799, the Revolution was interpreted as an epochal threshold, historically unprecedented and therefore inexplicable by reference to the past. Even the Seven Years' War (1756–63), which not only involved most of Europe but extended to European colonies on four continents, had not appeared so exceptional to its contemporary chroniclers; and to the end of his life Frederick the Great adhered to the traditional understanding of the past as exemplary for the present: "History is the school of princes; it is for them to study the errors of past centuries in order to avoid them."[17] In contrast, an antipathetic observer of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, declared it already in 1790 "the most astonishing [thing] that hitherto happened in the world," while an enthusiastic protagonist, Maximilien Robespierre, informed the National Convention in 1793 that "the theory of revolutionary government is as new as the revolution that brought it about."[18] It did not require a gift of prophecy, therefore,

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[16] Blanning, *Pursuit*, p. 676; see also Koselleck, "Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert," p. 272.

[17] Friedrich II, Preface to *Histoire de mon temps* (1775), *Œuvres*, vol. II, p. xxii.

[18] Burke, p. 10; Robespierre, "Rapport sur les principes du Gouvernement révolutionnaire,

for Goethe (who was hostile to the Revolution) to tell the dejected Prussian soldiers at the Battle of Valmy on September 19, 1792, "From here and today proceeds a new epoch of world history, and you will be able to say that you were there."[19] The accuracy of his recollection, when he wrote up the *Campaign in France* thirty years later, matters less than his assumption – which he expected his readers no less than his original auditors to share – that an epochal event could be recognized as such by its participants, even before it was over.

That the Revolution attracted such interpretations was owing less to the unfolding events themselves than to *intellectual* developments in the preceding decades, especially the temporalization of history and the historicization of culture. In the first, history began to be understood as an open-ended succession of unique events rather than a closed circle of recurrent ones; in the second, Montesquieu's concept of the *esprit général*, meaning the combination of physical and moral causes of the particular character of a nation, was adapted to elicit the distinctiveness of the present age by comparison to past ages.[20] Although Frederick the Great may have remained untouched by these developments, later generations did not: they were transnational in range and surprisingly independent of individual national

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fait au nom du Comité de Salut Public," *Œuvres*, vol. X, p. 274. Less than a month after the fall of the Bastille, the British Whig leader, Charles James Fox, exclaimed, "It is I think by much the greatest Event that has ever happened in the world, and will in all probability have the most extensive good consequences" (quoted in Mitchell, p. 110).

[19] Goethe, *Campagne in Frankreich 1792*, *Werke*, sect. 1, vol. XXXIII, p. 75.

[20] On temporalization see Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, pp. 38–66, 300–48; and Roche, chap. 3; on historicization in this sense see Yack, p. 23. More generally on the influence of Montesquieu's relational historical analysis, see Meinecke, chap. 3; Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. II, pp. 325–32; Reill, pp. 70–71; and Schiffman, pp. 234–65. Montesquieu defined *esprit général* in *L'Esprit des lois* (1748), bk. 19, chap. 6, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 558.

conditions. By entertaining the possibility of the intrahistorical appearance of the radically new – a possibility excluded from exemplary history, which assumes the cyclicality of historical patterns – this historicizing perspective encouraged both the division of historical time into self-contained periods and, more particularly, the identification of an inaugural event from which a period could be dated. Such an event would merit the designation *revolution* in its modern sense (which also developed during the eighteenth century), namely as a turning point from which there is no turning back.

III: Enlightenment Inheritances

The development of historicism and of a critique of modernity within Enlightenment thought is worth emphasizing in view of the persistent commonplace that Romanticism constitutes a fundamental rejection of Enlightenment thought. This opinion, which derives partly from Heinrich Heine's devastating satire of the German "Romantic school" (the Schlegel brothers, Brentano, and Arnim were among his targets) as the morally hypocritical, politically reactionary, and nationally chauvinistic embrace of medieval Catholicism, is based on a facile association of Enlightenment with rationalism and Romanticism with irrationalism, not to mention a selective identification of figures as Romantics.[21] This is not to say that Heine's caricature was entirely groundless, for the conjunction of nationalism, religious fervor, and medievalism was a notable feature of writers who (like Brentano and Arnim) from about 1807 were grouped, mostly by their opponents, under the noun *Romantik*. The same conjunction characterized artists like Caspar David Friedrich and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose paintings of the 1810s symbolized patriotic opposition to the Napoleonic occupation

[21] Heine, *Die Romantische Schule* (1836), *Werke*, vol. III, pp. 357–504. Recent examples include Blanning, *Romantic*, pp. 8–9; Reed, p. 2; and Gay, *Why the Romantics*, pp. 14–16.

with figures in traditional German costume or scenes of medieval cathedrals and castles.[22]

It is also true, though it was not Heine's concern, that various Romantic-era writers, including Goethe and Schelling in Germany and William Blake and S. T. Coleridge in England, severely criticized Newtonian science, that exemplary Enlightenment achievement – and canonized as such by Voltaire – for replacing nature with a mental fiction by reducing phenomena to relations of number and magnitude. As Blake captioned one of his drawings, exhibited in 1809 but since lost, "The horse of Intellect is leaping from the cliffs of Memory and Reasoning; it is a barren Rock: it is also called the Barren Waste of Locke and Newton." Lecturing on Wordsworth in 1818, the critic William Hazlitt, who had retained his youthful radicalism, included in his long enumeration of the poet's faults, "He hates Voltaire; he hates Sir Isaac Newton."[23]

Nonetheless, however much some Romantics may have adored medieval Catholicism or detested Newtonianism, the fact remains that the ostensibly counter-Enlightenment tendencies in Romanticism had already developed in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. Let us briefly consider five prominent examples: artistic expressivism, the rejection of aesthetic rationalism in favor of emotionalism, the defence of religious faith against

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[22] On *Romantik* as a designation of contemporary writers, see Eichner, "Germany," pp. 142–47; on Friedrich's patriotic paintings see Hofmann, *Friedrich*, pp. 85–99, and on Schinkel's see Vaughan, pp. 130–33. In England a comparable mixture of nationalism and religion appears in the formerly radical Wordsworth's anti-Napoleonic poetry, such as the notorious "Thanksgiving Ode" of 1816, which justifies British militarism as "the most dreaded instrument" of "Almighty God" (ll. 275–82): see *Wordsworth's Poetry*, pp. 536–38.

[23] Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, *Complete Poetry*, p. 546; Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Living English Poets*, quoted in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 546. On critiques of Newton by Goethe and Romantic *Naturphilosophen*, see Levere, pp. 48–52, 149–53; and Burwick.

rationalism, medievalism, and cultural nationalism.[24]

According to the well-known thesis of M. H. Abrams, Romanticism marked the fundamental transition from a mimetic conception of poetry, focused on the relationship of the work to reality and dominant from Plato into the eighteenth century, to an expressivist conception, focused on the relationship of the work to the artist.[25] Thus Coleridge, in his intellectual apologia *Biographia Literaria* (1817), felt compelled to explicate the poetic imagination before proceeding to criticize Wordsworth's poetry. Understanding the artistic process was a prerequisite to assessing the product because (and here Coleridge was in accord with A. W. Schlegel and Wordsworth) the principles by which a poem is judged should be those by which it was composed, which in turn are intrinsic to the poem. Yet Coleridge's definition of the imagination "as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation" had precedents in the redefinitions, first by the third Earl of Shaftesbury in his influential *Moralists* (1710) and later by Johann Gottfried Herder in *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1783) and Karl Philipp Moritz in "On the Pictorial Imitation of the Beautiful" (1788), of mimesis as reproduction of the creation of nature rather than of created nature itself.[26] More generally, the Romantic identification of artistic genius with the imaginative faculty derived from eighteenth-century discussions of the topic, particularly Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius* (1774).

Wordsworth famously defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and Abrams has explained the centrality of this axiom to expressivist theory.[27] But

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[24] This line of argument is developed much more fully by Engell and Lessenich.

[25] See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

[26] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, *Collected Works*, vol. VII, pt. 1, p. 304.

[27] Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *Wordsworth's Poetry*, pp. 79, 92; Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 21–22.

in Britain the displacement of neoclassical rationalism, which sought to define universal rules and abstract models for artistic practice, by an aesthetics that privileged subjective sentiment had begun with Shaftesbury's *Moralists* and Joseph Addison's *Spectator* papers "On the Pleasures of the Imagination" (1712) and was already well advanced by the time of Burke's widely disseminated *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). As far as the *representation* of affective states was concerned, the way had been prepared for Romantic writers and artists by the literary forms to which eighteenth-century analyses of emotional responses to aesthetic stimuli had given special impetus, namely epistolary fiction with its exploration of subjective self-presentation (in England and France from the 1740s, in Germany from the 1750s), the Gothic with its representation of extreme emotions and morally transgressive behaviors (in England from the 1760s), and sentimental fiction with its commendation of heightened sensibility (in England and France from the 1760s, in Germany during the so-called *Sturm und Drang* period of 1771–80). Ironically, eighteenth-century subjectivist aesthetics assisted Chateaubriand, in the *Génie du christianisme* (1802), in defending Catholicism against Enlightenment attacks on religion, for he presented religious feeling in terms of an experience that had preoccupied aesthetic theorists from Burke to Kant: the sublime, in which the individual is supposed to be overwhelmed and exalted by the encounter with a natural scene. So the aestheticized religion in which Chateaubriand would have us take refuge from modern alienation is itself suspiciously modern.

It was only logical that the critical spirit of Enlightenment should turn its attention to the dogmas lurking within philosophy itself. But such self-critique was not limited to Hume's rejection of causal necessity or Kant's exclusion of metaphysics from the realm of knowledge. Blake's belief in the truth of individual vision had affinities with George Berkeley's empiricist idealism, which (as elaborated in *A New Theory of Vision*, 1720)

rejected the possibility of objective standards of measurement.[28] And Coleridge's *Logosophia*, a long-contemplated but never-completed project of vindicating the grounding of reason in faith, drew inspiration from, among others, two influential eighteenth-century critics of rationalism: the Englishman William Law, whose *Way to Divine Knowledge* (1720) argued that reason's respect for its own limits should make it appreciate the necessity of faith; and the German Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, whose *On the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785, rev. 1789) argued that a consistent rationalism, assuming the universal applicability of the principle of sufficient reason, was deterministic and fatalistic and therefore incompatible with the ideas of a self-caused God and human free will.

Heine interpreted the German Romantic celebration of the Middle Ages as a collusion between those who, like the Rhenish polemicist Joseph Görres, wanted to resurrect the spirit of medieval Catholicism in Germany and the princes who wanted to strengthen hostility to the French occupiers by fostering a specious sense of German cultural unity. While not inaccurate, this interpretation does not sufficiently explain the renewal, from the mid-eighteenth century and in France and Britain as well as Germany, of an interest in things medieval. For the positive revaluation of medieval artistry began in earnest not with Görres and Friedrich Schlegel, as Heine implied, but with Jacques Germain Soufflot's "Mémoire sur l'architecture gothique" (1741) and Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762). In fact this was a manifestation of an emergent historicism, which, by maintaining the individual integrity of every age and culture, encouraged the recovery of the past – recognized as such – on the one hand as historical artifact (e.g., the ballads collected in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English* Poetry, 1765) and on the other as stylistic replica or recreation (e.g., James Macpherson's purported translations of ancient Scottish bardic poetry, the Ossian poems of 1762–63, which were immensely popular in western and

[28] See Frye, chap. 1.

eastern Europe into the nineteenth century). In its historical premises the so-called Gothic Revival was no different from the contemporaneous Greek Revival, which also assumed a dual archaeological and imitative character with the study of ancient Greek buildings and the construction of new ones in Greek styles – and which also continued well into the nineteenth century, as the careers of Schinkel and Leo von Klenze, the leading architects respectively of Prussia and Bavaria, exemplify.[29]

If all cultures had an intrinsic worth and could be fully understood only on their own terms, then it followed that the vernacular had no less claim to consideration than the long-normative classical. Historicism thus served to bolster the conceptualization and promotion of distinct national literary and artistic canons, a process that had begun in Britain in the late seventeenth century and would follow in Germany in the eighteenth with encouragement especially from Herder. In that respect the Gothic Revival, in Germany as in Britain, was overdetermined. While Soufflot appreciated Strasbourg Cathedral on structural and aesthetic grounds, Goethe did so on nationalistic grounds, (mistakenly) proclaiming Gothic style autochthonously German in *On German Architecture* (1773). When Goethe published that jingoistic essay, Napoleon was still an infant and the prospect of completing Cologne's half-built medieval cathedral as a monument to Germanness, fantasized by Friedrich Schlegel (in *Letters from a Trip*, 1806) and actively promoted by Görres, lay decades in the future.

IV: The Sense of a New Epoch

That the representative tendencies just surveyed were not only not exclusive to Romanticism but present in the movement against which it is supposed to have rebelled will not seem paradoxical if we acknowledge that Enlightenment thought was multivalent and that epochs are not empirical facts but conceptual fictions created to assist in comprehending history.

[29] See Halmi, "Anti-Historicist."

Indeed, it might be said that what was most distinctive of the Romantic period was its evident compulsion to designate itself a new world-historical epoch. If the French Revolution was not "the master theme of the epoch in which we live," as Shelley declared to Byron in 1816,[30] it was certainly the focal point of historical self-orientation, the intended permanence of which from the revolutionaries' perspective was signaled in their institution in October 1793 of a new calendar, whose beginning was retrospectively assigned to the proclamation of the French Republic on September 22, 1792. Even the Christian division of history into a before and after at the Incarnation had not been so stark, since the new chronology was adopted six centuries after the event and it incorporated the existing Roman (Julian) calendar. The playwright Philippe Fabre d'Eglantine, who devised the seasonal nomenclature for the French calendar (*Brumaire*, *Germinal*, *Floreal*, *Thermidor*, etc.), made explicit its purpose of defining the Republic as historically discontinuous with the *ancien régime*: "We can no longer count years during which the kings oppressed us as a time in which we lived."[31] The sense of futurity implied in the calendar was what Wordsworth, as he recalled bitterly in 1805, had experienced while traveling through France in 1790: "'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again."[32] Such a demarcation of the present and future from the past was all the more necessary precisely because the condition of modernity, predicated on an open-ended temporality and the concept of indefinite immanent progress, presented itself under two aspects, as existential condition and unrealized project.

The paradox of an epoch that conceived itself as the first to be self-conscious of its historicity is that it could not recognize the unhistorical nature of that very conception. That

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[30] Shelley, *Letters*, vol. I, p. 504 (September 8, 1816).

[31] Quoted in Ozouf, p. 541.

[32] *The Prelude* 6.352–54, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 249.

roughly was Nietzsche's point when he ridiculed Hegel, who declared philosophy "its own time grasped in thoughts," for assuming that the world-spirit "became transparent and intelligible to itself in the Hegelian cranium [*Hegelischen Hirnschalen*] . . . so that for Hegel the apex and terminus of world history [*des Weltprozesses*] coincided in his own Berlin existence."[33] The founder of the nineteenth-century "Berlin school" of historiography, Wilhelm von Humboldt, opined that "the eighteenth century occupies in the history of all times the most favorable place for examining and appreciating [*würdigen*] its own character" because "we enjoy in our standpoint the great advantage . . . of completely and perfectly overseeing [*ganz und vollständig zu übersehen*] the first two eras [i.e., antiquity and the Middle Ages]."[34] By thus privileging itself, the present demanded a caesura in historical time before which its state of enlightened clarity had not yet been achieved. So if the French Revolution had not occurred, it would have been necessary for the Romantic generation to invent it. In the event, the revolution met the expectation of a decisive disruption from which the present could be dated, but of course it could not guarantee that the specific hopes invested in it would be fulfilled – as for many they were not, especially with regard to the realization of the secular natural-law (i.e., Enlightenment) principles proclaimed in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), a document that derived from the American Declaration of Independence (1776). However epistemologically superior its viewpoint to what obtained in the past, the new historical understanding was always in danger of being superseded by a yet newer understanding.

This was a problem that the Swiss historian Johannes von Müller experienced as the

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[33] Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1821), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. VII, p. 26; Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben" (1874), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. I, p. 308.

[34] Humboldt, "Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert" (ca. 1796–97), *Werke*, vol. I, p. 401.

incompatibility of historicity with systematicity. Writing to his brother from Vienna in 1797, he complained not only that he was unable to finish his manuscript on universal history, which had sought to discern a providential plan from the empirical data of human history, but that the entire project was losing "much of its value on account of recent history": "Everything is becoming so completely different [*so ganz anders*] that the writer is simply unable to establish a fixed point of view [*den Augpunkt zu fixieren*]."[35] The limits of Müller's historicism meant that he could recognize perspectival relativism not as an inherent epistemic condition of historiography, but only as an historically emergent imposition upon it – one that his teleological interpretation of history could not accommodate. He left his manuscript unfinished, its narrative stopping at 1783, the year in which God had presumably abandoned humanity to its own devices. The new epoch, precisely because it was new, had made history harder rather than easier to comprehend.

The provisionality of the understanding of the present found expression in the provisional content and open forms of Romantic-era writing. The self-conscious fragment – that is, a work presented as a fragment, like the *pensées* published by Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) under the title *Pollen* (1798), Coleridge's interrupted dream-poem "Kubla Khan" (composed ca. 1797, published 1816), or Ugo Foscolo's both fragmentary and actually unfinished poem *Le Grazie* (composed 1803–22, published in part by the poet in 1822) – is often referred to as a distinctively Romantic literary form, the principal purpose of which is to gesture towards a totality that can be sensed but not fully conceptualized or expressed.[36] In the self-reflexive way that it advertises its inability to represent the infinite or absolute directly, but without renouncing the assumption of its ability to do so indirectly, the fragment performs what Friedrich Schlegel conceived as irony and is now called, in recognition of his

[35] Müller, p. 212 (quoted by Fritzsche, p. 25).

[36] See Behler, pp. 141–53; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, pp. 57–80.

elaboration of the concept, *Romantic irony*. He himself explained it as "the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication [*einer vollständigen Mittheilung*]."[37] But only he made fragments a preferred public form of critical reflection, and then only in the years 1797–1800, when he published a collection of "Critical Fragments" in the journal *Lyceum* (1797) and included two further collections (with contributions from his brother and Friedrich Schleiermacher) in the first and last volumes of the *Athenaeum* (1798 and 1800), the periodical he edited with August Wilhelm. Literary works did not need to be fragmentary in form, moreover, to express an intimation of or longing for the infinite by means of the finite: in Giacomo Leopardi's famous lyric "L'Infinito" (composed 1819, published 1826), the reflection on "endless spaces [*interminati spazi*]" is stimulated by a hedge that blocks the speaker's view of the horizon.[38]

Arguably, an even more characteristically Romantic form (one that can include the critical fragment) is the manifesto or programmatic statement, which announces the task to be undertaken in order to progress intellectually, morally, and artistically, in particular towards individual and collective self-determination and self-expression. Such documents, the large number of which written from the 1790s onwards exemplifies "literature producing itself in producing its own theory,"[39] gesture towards totality in temporal terms by conjuring up a future of which the present imagines itself to be part – the new epoch, the reborn human nature – and thus reflect the duality of modernity as reality and potentiality. Notable examples of such statements include Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795), which recommended aesthetic experience (as opposed to political action) to counteract the alienating effects of modern social life; the so-called "Earliest Systematic

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[37] Schlegel, *Lyceum-Fragment* 108, *Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. II, p. 160.

[38] Leopardi, "L'Infinito," ll. 1–7, *Opere*, vol. I, p. 58.

[39] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, p. 22.

Program of German Idealism" (ca. 1796), which will be discussed below; Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 and 1802), which defended "low and rustic" subjects and plain diction as the poetical means of cultivating imaginative sympathy and hence public morality; Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), which exhorted Germans to realize their eternal destiny by subordinating themselves to the fatherland (then under French occupation); Madame de Staël's *On Germany* (1813), which presented a progressive and vigorous Germany as an alternative to a despotically ruled and culturally enervated France; Orest Somov's "On Romantic Poetry" (1823), which paraphrased passages from Madame de Staël and exhorted Russians to create their own Romanticism from indigenous sources; Stendhal's *Racine and Shakespeare* (1823–25), which defined Romanticism as literature that gave the public pleasure by representing contemporary life and customs; Victor Hugo's preface to his play *Cromwell* (1827), which called for art to follow its internal laws of development rather than the external precepts of neoclassical criticism; Antonio Alcalá Galiano's anonymous manifesto of 1834 (published as the prologue to his friend Angel de Saavedra's narrative poem *El moro expósito*), which sought to dissociate Romanticism from Spanish Golden Age drama (Spanish critics having assimilated A. W. Schlegel's well-known classification of Calderón as "romantic" in his 1808 lectures on drama) and to redefine it as a contemporary literature synthesizing the real and the ideal; and Giuseppe Mazzini's essay "The Duties of Man" (1844), which encouraged Italians to improve their lot by unifying their nation politically and culturally.

The fragment and programmatic statement coincided with the theorization of the romantic in Friedrich Schlegel's celebrated *Athenaeum Fragment* 116. Like other critics of the time, Schlegel used the category *romantic* at once historically and normatively, to define what "romantic poetry" both is and should be: not a particular kind of verse, he insisted, but a creative activity that reunites "all the divided genres of poetry" and furthermore fuses poetry

and prose, literature and other disciplines in order to encourage social cohesion. If in one sense (used also by August Wilhelm) *romantische Poesie* is simply post-classical and already exists, in contradistinction to other kinds of poetry "that are finished and can now be fully anatomized," then in another, because "its true essence is always to be developing [*ewig zu werden*]" and never to be completed, it does not yet exist. Schlegel's insistence that *romantische Poesie* recognizes no law but the poet's will might seem like an expressivist rejection of neoclassical prescriptive criticism. But when the species subsumes the genus in the fragment's final sentence, which declares that "all poetry is or should be romantic," we sense the larger stakes in Schlegel's concept: the desire for a synthesis of disciplines and unification of knowledge in the face of a contemporary sense of intellectual and social fragmentation and uncertainty.[40] By means of a fragment he sought to offer the prospect of wholeness.

IV: Some Romantic Responses to "this time / Of dereliction and dismay"

Already in 1762 Rousseau had forecast an approaching "state of crisis and century of revolutions" whose outcome was unknowable.[41] And the early reception of the French Revolution confirms that the expectation of a new epoch – one founded on abstract ideas of rights and equality – preceded any experience, especially among observers outside France, which could have justified that expectation. As the 1790s proceeded without political stability in France and the hopes initially invested in the revolution increasingly seemed misplaced, European intellectuals were compelled to reassess the relationship between the idea of freedom and its historical actualization. This was an issue that Kant – regarding himself free to publish on religious and political subjects after the death of the reactionary Prussian king

[40] Schlegel, *Athenäum-Fragment* 116, *Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. II, pp. 182–83.

[41] Rousseau, *Émile ou De l'Éducation*, bk. 3, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, pp. 468–69.

Friedrich Wilhelm II in 1797 – addressed in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, published the same year as the first volume of the *Athenaeum*. Strikingly, he argued not that the French Revolution itself but that the early public reaction to it was "epoch-making [*Epoche machend*]". While the revolution might fail, or succeed at such cost as to discourage a repetition of the experiment, enthusiasm for its goal of a republican constitution testified to an advancement of human morality, one owing to "nature and freedom alone, united according to the inner principles of right." Distinguishing between "mode of thinking" (*Denkungsart*) and "experience" (*Erfahrung*) allowed Kant to affirm an epoch of republicanism without republican government and thereby preserve the idea he was unwilling to relinquish, that human history has a moral *telos*.[42]

The Conflict of the Faculties is worth dwelling on for a moment because its elisions reveal in miniature the philosophical *aporiai* with which the early Romantic generation, born several decades after Kant, had also to contend, as will be considered by way of conclusion. Kant interpreted the manifestation of an affect, "enthusiasm" (his word is *Enthusiasm* instead of the more usual *Schwärmerei*), as an "historical sign" (*Geschichtszeichen*) of progress towards the appropriate political realization of a principle of practical reason, freedom. By thus applying a transcendental conception of individual human psychology to an historical conception of collective human nature, he sought to reconcile contingent historical facts with *a priori* moral principles. But the strong qualifications in which he couched his optimism – humans are predisposed to a mixture of good and evil, enthusiasm as such is inimical to reason and worthy of censure (*Tadel verdient*), the actual outcome of the revolutionary process is unpredictable – betray the difficulty of relating the individual to the collective, the transcendental to the empirical, practical reason to political practice, from a unified

[42] Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, pt. 2, §§ 6–7, *Werke*, vol. VII, pp. 85–89.

perspective.[43] (The first of these difficulties also found expression in Kant's dissociation of republicanism from democracy on the grounds that the latter, by treating everyone as a ruler, conflates legislative with executive power and thus excludes the possibility of representative [*representativ*] government.)[44] Kant's outspoken sympathy for the French Revolution as late as 1798 was unusual. But his reservation, in seeking empirical confirmation of the autonomy which he considered defining of the modern subject – that is, the ability to recognize and act on moral principles determined by reason alone – is symptomatic of its time.

Kant's appeal here to history for an intimation of a moral law that by his own account could not be confirmed empirically is analogous to his earlier effort, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), to bridge the chasm between the sensible realm of the concept of nature and the supersensible realm of the concept of freedom by means of what he called the "aesthetic idea." Explained as the sensible presentation of a rational idea, the aesthetic idea was supposed to make morality intuitable with "the appearance of an objective reality [*dem Anschein einer objectiven Realität*]."[45] Though discussed only fleetingly in the third *Critique*, the concept of the aesthetic idea, as an attempt to mitigate Kant's self-imposed dualism of knowledge and metaphysics, furnished an important model for a concept of non-discursive representation formulated by Goethe and further elaborated by Schelling (in lectures on the *Philosophy of Art*, delivered 1802–4, and his *System of the Complete Philosophy*, 1804) and Coleridge (chiefly in his notebooks and *The Statesman's Manual*, 1816), namely that of the symbol – or as it is widely known now, the Romantic symbol. Not confined to the aesthetic sphere, in contrast to artistic symbols, but extending to nature, the symbol was supposed to perform the same function in relation to "intellectual intuition" (which presupposed the

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[43] Kant, *Streit*, pt. 2, §§ 4–6, *Werke*, vol. VII, pp. 84–86.

[44] Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), *Werke*, vol. VIII, pp. 352–53.

[45] Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, § 49, *Werke*, vol. V, p. 314.

primordial unity of subject and object as the condition of reflection) that Kant's aesthetic idea was in relation to a moral idea: to objectify it.[46] Once it was recognized – and the purpose of its theorization was to ensure that it could be – the symbol, because it was supposed to participate ontologically in its referent (that is, not merely to represent but to be part of what it symbolized), would reassure its viewer of the meaningfulness of nature to humanity and of humanity's participation with nature in an ordered and unified whole.

Reflecting what might be called a broader symbolic sensibility and a resistance to materialist natural philosophy, nineteenth-century painters found ways to suggest that nature is pregnant with meaning to the knowing observer. Philipp Otto Runge's planned series *The Times of the Day*, of which only preparatory drawings and one painting (*Morning*, 1808) were completed, was to express his conception of nature as a system of "hieroglyphs" through images of giant lilies surrounded by groups of winged genii. More subtly, by signaling "the presence of an occulted meaning . . . without, however, compromising the structural or temporal integrity of the natural world," Caspar David Friedrich's landscape paintings offered something like a non-discursive counterpart to Schelling's discursive exposition of the concept of the symbol (which the painter may have known through a mutual friend, G. H. Schubert).[47] Friedrich's famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1818), in which a foregrounded man with his back towards us stands atop a rocky peak and gazes across the mist towards mountains in the distance, represents not only nature itself but the act of perceiving it, for the man in the painting reproduces the stance of the painting's viewer: we are looking at him looking at the natural scene. Like him, we can recognize from visible fragments, the summits extending above the mist, the invisible presence of the whole, the

[46] On "intellectual intuition" see Chapter 1 above. On the concept of the symbol, see Halmi, *Genealogy*.

[47] Koerner, pp. 151, 253.

entire mountain range. The foregrounding of the *Rückenfigur* (a favorite device of Friedrich's) makes him appear as large as the mountains – in contrast to the dwarfed figures in paintings of conventionally sublime landscapes – and implies an equality between perceiving subject and perceived object, both united within the painting's frame as within the cosmic order.

That Coleridge for his part considered the perception of nature's symbols to have moral and political implications, insofar as the correctly understood natural order might offer a model for reform of the social order, is evident from his discussing the concept of the symbol in *The Statesman's Manual*, a pamphlet intended to prepare Britain's "higher classes" intellectually for the task of governance. Eccentric as that project may seem to us (and seemed to Coleridge's contemporaries), it was comparable in its basic aims to a more speculative and optimistic project that had suggested itself to the early German Romantics: a "new mythology." The desirability of a modern "mythology of *reason*," which would make aesthetic and thus publicly accessible the idea of the self as "an absolutely free being," was affirmed in the fragmentary manuscript known since its publication in 1917 as the "Earliest Systematic Program of German Idealism" and attributed variously to the Tübingen seminary students Hegel, Schelling, and Friedrich Hölderlin (and possibly reflecting input from all three).[48] Notably anticlerical in tone, the document imagines the new mythology as a replacement for established religion, providing, through its fusion of the philosophical and the aesthetic, the intellectual and cultural basis of a future society in which "the *equal* development of *all* powers await[s] us, those of the particular person [*des Einzelnen*] as well

[48] The text of "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" appears in Jamme and Schneider, pp. 8–14, and an English translation in Halmi, *Genealogy*, pp. 170–72. Both volumes contain critical analysis of the document. On its relation to modern political theory, see Frank, pp. 153–87.

as of all individuals." The obvious question of what form this mythology might take was not addressed in the "Systemprogramm," but was in Friedrich Schlegel's version of the proposal, published in the *Athenaeum* ("Dialogue on Poetry," 1800). Although the content of the new mythology was to come from modern physics and idealist philosophy ("the great phenomenon of the age"), Schlegel's spokesman Ludoviko explained, these sources were not yet able to supply the "symbolic view of nature" required for the form, which accordingly had to be reappropriated from "the motley crew of old gods" in Greek mythology because they had (supposedly) embodied such a view.[49] So the new mythology was to be at once completely different from and remarkably similar to the old one – an ambivalent expression of modernity. Small wonder, then, that when Schelling took up the idea in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), he deferred its realization to the indefinite future.[50]

Another indefinitely deferred project was the "philosophical poem" that Coleridge encouraged Wordsworth to undertake for the benefit of those "who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind."[51] Called *The Recluse*, the poem was to be "On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life," as Wordsworth grandly announced in a proleptically published "Prospectus" (1814). In the event, he wrote only parts of the projected whole, but one of these was the thirteen-book *Prelude* (composed mostly in 1804–5), now recognized as his masterpiece and one of the

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[49] Schlegel, "Gespräch über die Poesie," *Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. II, pp. 311–22. Foscolo's unfinished poem on the Graces, *Le Grazie*, celebrating the civilizing power of the arts and intended to be dedicated to the neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, similarly models a new mythology by apostrophizing figures from classical myth (*Opere*, vol. I, pp. 395–532).

[50] Schelling, *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. III, p. 629.

[51] Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 527 (September 1795).

major long poems in English literature.[52] In effect steeling himself up to write so ambitious a work as *The Recluse* in "this time / Of dereliction and dismay" (2.446–47), twelve years into the war with France, Wordsworth surveyed his intellectual and moral development from early childhood to confirm his vocation as a poet of "lasting inspiration, sanctified / By reason and by truth" (13.443–44). Extrapolating from the moral grounding he believed to have acquired in his youthful encounters with nature and from the subsequent discovery of the power of his imagination – experiences that he pointedly contrasts with the course of the philosophically based French Revolution (which he had witnessed personally in 1790 and 1791–92) – Wordsworth articulates the general principle that love of nature leads through cultivation of the sympathetic imagination to love of mankind. Aligning reason with imagination as the foundations of "intellectual love" (13.166–88), the poem implicitly offers the poet's own path out of spiritual crisis as exemplary for the modern age in finding compensations for the disappointments of history. Beginning with self-doubt and uncertainty, the poem ends with self-confidence and a commitment to teach others

> how the mind of Man becomes
>
> A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
>
> On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
>
> (Which 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
>
> And fears of Men doth still remain unchanged)
>
> In beauty exalted, as it is itself
>
> Of substance and of fabric more divine. (13.446–52)

Yet the larger project remained unfinished and *The Prelude* itself, which Wordsworth wanted to shield from hostile critics, unpublished till after his death in 1850.

While poetry offered Wordsworth a consolation in the face of contemporary history's

[52] *Wordsworth's Poetry*, pp. 167–377. Parenthetical references are to book and line numbers.

"outrage and bloody power" (*Prelude* 10.181), it suggested to the painter Eugène Delacroix ways of conveying exactly such outrage and violence. His vast *Massacre at Chios* (exhibited in Paris in 1824, only two years after the event) was inspired by Dante's representation of despairing souls in the *Inferno* and Byron's of the fatal conflict between a Venetian and a Turk in Ottoman-occupied Greece in *The Giaour* (a narrative poem of 1813), as well as informed by newspaper reports and eyewitness accounts. Focusing on the Greek victims rather than the Ottoman perpetrators, the painting foregrounds a group of thirteen captured men, women, and children, including an infant at its dead mother's breast and a women stripped and lashed to a Turkish officer's rearing horse.[53] An even more direct and anti-heroic presentation of contemporary warfare – among the most unsparing and disturbing ever created – was Francisco Goya's series of eighty-two etchings of scenes from the Peninsular War (1808–14). Posthumously published in 1863 under the title *Disasters of the War*, the etchings depict atrocities committed by both sides on soldiers and civilians, the effects of famine in Madrid during the French occupation of 1811–12, and – allegorically – the oppressiveness of the restored Ferdinand VII's regime. Conspicuously absent from the series is any indication of a providentially directed outcome or overall meaning to the conflict.

Recent and contemporary history also provided constant points of reference for an unfinished epic-length poem deplored by Wordsworth but admired by innumerable readers throughout Europe, a poem whose literary impact in the Romantic period can be readily discerned, for example, in the comic opening scenes of Stendhal's novel *Red and Black* (1831) and in the easy diction and digressive narrative of Alexander Pushkin's verse-novel *Eugene Onegin* (1825–32). The poem was Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–23), the freedom of whose narrative structure, diction, and treatment of sensitive themes (religion, sex, war, politics, cannibalism, contemporary English poetry) is inversely related to the restrictedness

[53] See Hofmann, *Das entzweite Jahrhundert*, pp. 591–97.

of its eight-line, three-rhyme stanzaic form (*ottava rima*).[54] A self-consciously anti-philosophical poem, *Don Juan* repudiates philosophical systems (14.1: "One system eats another up,"), satirizes Berkeleyan idealism (11.1: "When Bishop Berkeley said 'there was no matter,' / – And proved it – 'twas no matter what he said"), refuses speculation on metaphysical questions (14.3: "I know nought; nothing I deny"), and affirms a skeptical empiricism (14.2: "Nothing more true than *not* to trust your senses; / And yet what are your other evidences?"). Like Delacroix's *Massacres de Scio* and Goya's *Desastres de la guerra*, *Don Juan* refuses to dignify war with conventional notions of military heroism: "I want a hero," the poet begins, explaining that the present age has none to offer (1.1–5). Referring to the commemoration of soldiers in the Russo-Turkish war of 1787–92 (and implicitly of British soldiers at Waterloo in 1815), he asks sardonically, "I wonder (although Mars no doubt's a god I / Praise) if a man's name in a *bulletin* / May make up for a *bullet in* his body?" (7.21; Byron's emphasis). By repeatedly professing its adherence to an epic tradition that it manifestly, indeed gleefully, flouts, above all in its abandonment of any claim to a narrative teleology, *Don Juan* positions itself as a distinctly modern work, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty of finding a form adequate to a contemporary history which itself seems to lack a teleology: "I meant to make this poem very short," Byron informs the reader in canto 15, "but now I can't tell where it may not run" (15.22).

Accommodating the complexity and contingency of modern history both thematically (having the protagonist participate in historical events, referring to Byron's own experiences while writing the poem) and formally (in its frequent digressions from Don Juan's story and abrupt shifts in tone and rhetorical register) within the framework of a rigid verse form (one that Wordsworth never mastered), the poem suggests simultaneously the necessity and

[54] Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. V. Parenthetical references are to canto and stanza numbers.

impossibility of containing history within structures created by the human mind. In that respect *Don Juan* expresses perfectly the ambiguity and ambivalence of a time that could conceive of itself as a new epoch but could not be confident of fulfilling the promise implied by its newness.

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