

Transcendental Revolutions

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The juxtaposition of the terms ‘transcendental’ and ‘revolutions’ may seem strange, indeed paradoxical. ‘Transcendental’ is often taken, after common usage in English and other European languages, to be equivalent to ‘transcendent’, denoting a concern with the supernatural or divine, as in nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism. ‘Revolution’ is typically used to designate the radical transformation, especially if perceived to be sudden, of an existing political, social, or intellectual order. The former term refers to the otherworldly, the latter to the worldly. But both have proved semantically elastic. In the eighteenth century, ‘revolution’ acquired its now-dominant meaning of a singular and disruptive, as opposed to recurrent and predictable, event, while in Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy ‘transcendental’ acquired an exclusively epistemological, as opposed to metaphysical, meaning, referring to the conditions of possible knowledge. I use the term ‘transcendental’ broadly here to refer to self-conscious reflections on the conditions of thought and the questioning of given systems of thought.

The conjunction of these two terms, in the preface to the second edition of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [Critique of Pure Reason] (1787) – which quickly acquired a significance exceeding what the author could have intended – will serve as the point of departure for this chapter, which is divided into two principal sections, the first addressing the concept of revolution itself and the second analysing examples of Romantic-period thinkers’ use of forms of transcendental critique in relation to the French Revolution. I begin with Kant’s preface because it illustrates particularly pointedly the alignment of theoretical with historical self-reflexivity at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth. Considered abstractly, Kant’s so-called transcendental turn, which sought by means of an epistemological critique to give metaphysics a sound rational footing, is

comparable to later attempts to institute or encourage reform by self-consciously questioning the principles on which established disciplines or practices were based. The examples of such attempts to be discussed here are Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, or theory of scientific knowledge; Friedrich Schiller's advocacy of what he called 'aesthetic education'; Friedrich Schlegel's programme for 'romantic poetry' and 'transcendental poetry'; and Percy Bysshe Shelley's epistemologically based proposal of moral and political reform. The chapter will conclude by considering the polemical association of William Wordsworth's self-proclaimed poetic reform in the *Lyrical Ballads* with the French Revolution.

The Concept of Revolution

On the face of it, transcendental critique, which inquires into the conditions presupposed by what has been taken as given, would seem to be no more than the application of that self-critical spirit that Kant himself identified, in his essay 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' [Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?] (1784), with human self-emancipation by means of reason and compared with the attainment of the age of majority. But in the highly polemical discursive climate of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the narrative of progress was repeatedly contested: accusations of *Unmündigkeit*, of remaining intellectually or morally in the age of minority, were the inevitable counterpart to claims for enlightenment.¹ Kant's vindication of enlightenment – as a process, not an age – was prompted by a question asked sardonically in 1783 by the Prussian clergyman and official Johann Friedrich Zöllner at the end of a periodical essay deploring the dissolution of the times. And the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* began provocatively by defining metaphysics as a 'battlefield of . . . endless controversies' (A viii).² In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) Edmund Burke acknowledged 'this enlightened age' only ironically, while Mary Wollstonecraft addressed the supposedly reasonable 'men of the eighteenth century' equally ironically in her refutation of Burke, the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (also 1790). From opposed political perspectives, both accepted that the march of progress did not necessarily proceed at a uniform pace: it could stop

1 See S. Martus, *Aufklärung: Das deutsche 18. Jahrhundert – ein Epochenbild* (Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2015), pp. 11–19, 835–71.

2 I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998). Parenthetical references are to the pagination of the first (1781 = A) or second (1787 = B) edition.

abruptly or leap forward suddenly. For Wollstonecraft, the cataclysmic events of the French Revolution, though unprecedented in themselves, were a logical and inevitable response to the intractable opposition of the ancien régime to 'intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection in the advancement of communities'.³ Revolution became necessary when evolution was no longer possible. This seems also to have been the view of Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known by his pseudonym Novalis: while shrewdly describing Burke's *Reflections* as 'a revolutionary book against the Revolution', he criticised those who, like Burke, regarded the Revolution as a 'disease' in need of a cure instead of recognising it as an inevitable 'crisis of entering puberty' in the process of enlightenment. Moreover, Novalis insisted, insofar as the French king was no longer 'identical with the intelligence of the state' – that is, was not an enlightened ruler – he 'had been dethroned long before the Revolution'.⁴

That revolution could be theorised in this way – as unprecedented yet expected, incompatible with the conditions that instigate it – was a consequence of the concept's semantic development in the eighteenth century. Assimilated to a new, temporalised understanding of historical time as a succession of unique events, and aligned with the concept of crisis as a moment or process of epochal transition, as Simon Swift explains in Chapter 6, the concept of revolution functioned simultaneously as a rhetorical device, announcing the rejection (whether desired or feared) of an existing state of affairs (whether political, philosophical, or artistic), and as a historical category, designating the complete transformation of that state – in other words, as both the promise and the confirmation of radical change. This is most obvious in the self-presentation of the French Revolution: for example, Robespierre's declaration to the National Convention in 1793 that 'the theory of revolutionary government is as new as the revolution that brought it about', or the new calendar predicated – as one of its creators, Philippe Fabre d'Églantine, acknowledged – on the chronological discontinuity between the monarchy and the republic.⁵ But these gestures would not

3 M. Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution (1794)*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd and M. Butler, 7 vols (London, Pickering, 1989), VI, pp. 1–233 (p. 7).

4 Novalis, 'Blütenstaub' (1798) nos. 104 and 105, in *Schriften*, 3rd ed., ed. R. Samuel and H.-J. Mähl, 5 vols (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1975–88), II, pp. 413–71 (p. 459); 'Glauben und Liebe' (1798) no. 28, in *Schriften*, II, pp. 475–503 (p. 492). For an astute analysis of Novalis's rhetoric concerning the French Revolution, see W. A. O'Brien, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 147–9 and 170–3.

5 See N. Halmi, 'European Romanticism: Ambivalent Responses to the Sense of a New Epoch', in W. Breckman and P. E. Gordon (eds), *The Cambridge History of Modern*

have been meaningful unless the *possibility* of the historical newness they asserted had already been accepted.

Up to the end of the seventeenth century, revolutions were understood to be cyclical events, the generic sense deriving from the term's astronomical application to orbital circuits, as in the title of Copernicus's treatise *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* [On the Revolutions of the Celestial Bodies] (1543). A new concept of revolution established itself in the near-contemporaneous designation of the replacement of James II by William and Mary in 1688–9 as a 'Glorious Revolution'.⁶ Although the coup d'état thus dignified could be interpreted by its supporters as a revolution in the older sense, by restoring constitutional order and the Protestant succession, its definitive restriction of monarchical power and establishment of parliamentary government in England encouraged Enlightenment *philosophes* to use the term 'revolution' more speculatively and moralisingly for large-scale political and social transformations. Thus in 1704 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz warned that a lack of 'public spirit' in Europe's ruling elites was creating the danger of 'general revolution', while in 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau predicted an approaching 'state of crisis and century of revolutions'.⁷ If Voltaire, writing in 1769 that 'a strange revolution in the human mind has occurred in the last fifteen years' that prompted statesmen to 'trample superstition', could look forward to 'the great day' to come in a few more years, then Denis Diderot, contributing anonymously in 1774 to the Abbé Raynal's history of the East and West Indies and referring ostensibly to Sweden but implicitly to France, could imagine a scenario in which a nation exhausted by internal conflict subjugates itself voluntarily to a dictator: 'What will follow from this revolution? No one knows.'⁸

For all their differences of political or religious perspective, these reflections shared a basic understanding of revolution as radical change produced

European Thought, 2 vols (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), I, pp. 40–64 (pp. 46, 52–3).

6 See H. Günther, 'Revolution', in J. Ritter, K. Gründer, and G. Gabriel (eds), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols (Basel, Schwabe, 1971–2007), VIII, pp. 957–73 (p. 961). See also H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, Penguin, 1990), pp. 42–7.

7 G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, ed. A. Robinet and H. Schepers, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, 51 vols to date (Berlin, Akademie, 1923–), VI, p. 462; J.-J. Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 5 vols (Paris, Gallimard, 1959–95), IV, pp. 239–868 (pp. 468–9).

8 Voltaire to G. H. Gaillard, 2 March 1769, in *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, Version 3.0, ed. R. McNamee (University of Oxford, 2018); G.-T. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 4 vols (Geneva, 1780), IV, pp. 488–9, on which see R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1979), pp. 35–7.

by human actions; they identified that change as ongoing or imminent; and they made no pretence of knowing what its effects would be. Applied contemporaneously rather than retrospectively, the concept served to express a premonition that existing conditions and established norms would or could no longer be tolerated and sustained. Thus, revolutions were predicted and proclaimed without specific claims as to their content or consequences: they revealed themselves by their very inscrutability, for they were by definition incommensurable with expectations derived from past experience. Insofar as the concept's own transformation during the eighteenth century was a response, as Reinhart Koselleck emphasised, to the disorienting experience of temporal acceleration – that is, the perception that major change was occurring ever more quickly – its applicability was limited neither to instantaneous events nor to the political realm.⁹

As a general category, 'revolution' could encompass individual events as well as longer-term processes, including political but also economic, scientific, and cultural developments. That is why talk of revolution became so widespread in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, and especially from the 1770s, despite the diverse political and socio-economic conditions of European states and despite the fact that major political, economic, and cultural changes (such as shifts in favoured artistic styles) rarely coincided exactly with one another. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that some of the most significant modernising tendencies – the spread of industrial capitalism, the shift from estates-based to class-based social organisation, the institution of constitutionalist government, the emancipation of slaves in European colonies – did not manifest themselves fully, or even begin in earnest, until after 1830.¹⁰ But what is at issue in the present chapter is historical *self*-interpretation.

With this context in mind, we may return to Kant, who had become convinced in the 1770s that philosophy could not make metaphysical or moral claims without first assessing what epistemological basis there might be for them – that is, establishing the conditions of the possibility of a priori cognition. Only by examining itself could reason 'secure its rightful claims

9 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, pp. 77–80, 329–30. See also H. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. J. Trejo-Mathys (New York, Columbia University Press, 2013). In a speech on 6 September 1780, for example, Burke referred to 'this eventful period, which has crowded into a few years space the revolutions of an age' (*Writings and Speeches*, ed. P. Langford, 9 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981–2015), III, p. 625).

10 J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. P. Camiller (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 59–63.

while dismissing all its groundless pretensions' without need of appeal to any external authority (A xi). This reorientation from the objects to the conditions of cognition required, in Kant's view, an entirely new kind of philosophy, which he undertook in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and which he designated 'transcendental', in defiance of the term's traditional uses as a synonym of 'metaphysical' and 'ontological'.¹¹ One consequence of his application of the transcendental method was to exclude the transcendent as a possible object of empirical knowledge.

Seeking, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique*, to clarify the nature and novelty of his transcendental method, Kant introduced a comparison that was subsequently exploited, in a phrase he did not actually use, to characterise the magnitude of his role in philosophical history: a 'Copernican revolution'. Noting that natural science had required 'a revolution brought about all at once' in order to progress to its present state, Kant proposed analogously to reverse the usual assumption, which had proved unavailing in addressing metaphysical questions, that our cognition must conform to its objects. Instead, let us assume that objects must conform to our cognition, rather as Copernicus, having failed to explain celestial motions adequately when he assumed that the observer was stationary, tried anew by postulating that the observer revolved and the stars stood still (B xv–xvi). A few pages later Kant returned to and complicated this analogy in a footnote, remarking that, as the laws of motion hypothesised by Copernicus were subsequently confirmed by Newton, so the 'transformation in our way of thinking' presented merely hypothetically in the preface would be 'proved . . . apodictically' in the *Critique* proper (B xxii n.). The elaboration of the analogy in the footnote thus insinuates that whereas the Copernican transformation of astronomy had not been fully accomplished till a century-and-a-half after the scientist's death, the transcendental turn in philosophy would be accomplished at once and by one man, the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Given that the second edition of the *Critique* was published two years before the storming of the Bastille, Kant cannot have intended, with his analogies of scientific revolution, to imply an affinity between his transcendental philosophy and the French Revolution. But neither was he implying, after the model of Copernicus's own concept of revolution, that he was merely restoring philosophy to its correct path from the errors of dogmatic

¹¹ See N. Hinske et al., 'Transzendental; Transzendentalphilosophie', in Ritter, Gründer, and Gabriel (eds), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, X, pp. 1358–88.

metaphysics. That Kant understood revolution to be fundamentally disruptive is evident from at least two texts separated by nearly two decades, one welcoming and the other demurring at the prospect. In 1765 he confided, in a philosophical equivalent to Voltaire's political prognosis quoted earlier,

Before true worldly philosophy [wahre Weltweisheit] is to come alive, it is necessary for the old philosophy to destroy itself, and just as putrefaction is the most perfect dissolution, which always occurs before a new generation begins, so the *crisis* of scholarship at this time gives me hope, since there is no shortage of good minds, that the long-desired great *revolution* of the sciences is no longer far away.

Nineteen years later he differentiated revolution as a sudden event from enlightenment as a gradual process: 'Thus a public can achieve enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may well bring about a falling off of personal despotism and of avaricious or tyrannical oppression, but never a true reform in one's way of thinking.'¹² In the preface of 1787, then, he was proposing to do exactly what he had declared in 1765 to be philosophically necessary and in 1784 to be politically impossible, namely to bring about enlightenment *by means* of a revolution. In fact, Kant was not the first to argue that philosophy needed to be reformed radically and placed on a firmer epistemological footing. As he would have known, David Hume had already done so in the introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), with no less awareness of the implications for 'moral subjects'.¹³ But after reading several reviews of 1785 that described the first *Critique* as 'revolutionary' and the beginning of 'a new epoch of philosophy', Kant may have recognised the strategic advantage of appropriating the term himself.¹⁴

If the 'wealth of meaning that had become attached to Copernicus's name' was one reason that a 'Copernican revolution' could subsequently be attributed to Kant,¹⁵ another was the resonance of the term 'revolution' during the eighteenth century. Kant's transcendental turn could be presented as revolutionary insofar as revolution had taken a transcendental turn of its own,

12 I. Kant to J. H. Lambert, 31 December 1765, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Reicke, 29 vols (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1900–2020), X, p. 57 (italics in original); I. Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?', in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. M. J. Gregor and A. W. Wood (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11–22 (p. 18).

13 D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton, 2 vols (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), I, p. 4.

14 L.-H. Pietsch, *Topik der Kritik: Die Auseinandersetzung um die Kantische Philosophie (1781–1788) und ihre Metaphern* (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 214–17.

15 H. Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 702.

becoming a *metahistorical* concept that subsumed both actual events and reflection on them: 'a regulative principle for knowledge as well as for the actions of all those encompassed by revolution'.¹⁶ Just as in transcendental idealism the thinking subject determined the conditions of its possible knowledge, so under the concept of revolution (as indeed under that of history itself) the historical subject defined the conditions of its possible actions. In both cases the subject was its own object, directing its reflection back upon itself. The assumption that historical understanding was founded on the identity of its conditions with those of historical actions themselves found explicit expression in Wilhelm von Humboldt's address of April 1821 on the historian's task: 'Every act of understanding [Jedes Begreifen] already presupposes in the one who understands [in dem Begreifenden], as a condition of its possibility, an analogue [Analogon] of that which is actually understood [Begriffenen] subsequently – an antecedent, original conformity between subject and object.' Historical knowledge depends not on the detachment of the observer from the observed, but on their very connection, inasmuch as the historian always exists within and is conditioned by history: '[A]ll that is active in world history also moves within man [in dem Innern des Menschen]'.¹⁷ To be sure, Humboldt himself granted historical ideas – the connections among events as discerned by the historian – not merely regulative but constitutive status, as the 'very essence' of history. Underlying this epistemological principle was a metaphysical principle that Kant would have judged unwarranted, namely that history has a providential plan.¹⁸ But the effective dissolution of the distinction between historical consciousness and historical action – which long preceded its affirmation in Humboldt's address – was the basis on which the concept of revolution served the Romantic generations equally as a prognostic and a polemical tool. Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote to Lord Byron in September 1816 that the French Revolution 'may be called the master theme of the epoch in which we live', but revolution per se would have had an even better claim to that title.¹⁹

If the French Revolution tended to absorb other events and phenomena, however closely or distantly connected, into its conceptual vortex, that was partly because it conformed in scale and ambition to the expectations of an

16 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, pp. 76–7.

17 W. von Humboldt, 'Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann, 17 vols (Berlin, Behr, 1904–36), IV, pp. 37–56 (pp. 47–8).

18 See F. C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 212–13.

19 P. B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F. L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), I, p. 504.

age that conceived itself for better or worse as revolutionary. Especially in the years 1789–93, and to an extent even afterwards, events in France were interpreted as the extension to Europe of a revolutionary movement on Enlightenment principles that had already manifested itself in America between 1776 and 1783.²⁰ Writing to Thomas Jefferson only weeks after the storming of the Bastille, the English Unitarian minister Richard Price, for one, rejoiced at the ‘General Revolution’ that he was convinced would now transform governments in Europe and around the world – exactly what Leibniz eighty-five years earlier had feared.²¹ As late as 1819–20 Shelley could maintain that the ‘just & successful Revolt of America corresponded with a state of public opinion in Europe of which it was one of the first results. The French Revolution was the second.’²² This was the epoch of epochal rupture.

Revolution in Thought: Kant, Fichte, Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel

That the American and French Revolutions were motivated, according to their protagonists and supporters, by principles of freedom and self-governance provided grounds for associating them with contemporary philosophical demands for the liberation of reason from externally imposed fetters. Thus the naturalist Georg Forster and the diplomat (and former student of Kant) Friedrich von Gentz greeted the events of 1789 precisely as the fulfilment of the Enlightenment, Gentz reflecting in 1790 that the failure of this ‘first practical triumph of philosophy’ would be ‘one of the worst disasters ever to befall the human race’.²³ That both revolutions, especially the French, resulted in violence and prolonged social disruption, however, also provided grounds for attacking the philosophies associated with them. With the Terror of 1793–4 and the revolutionary wars that occupied the rest

20 J. Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed: Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748–1830* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 256–64.

21 R. Price to T. Jefferson, 3 August 1789, quoted in J. Israel, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775–1848* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 268.

22 P. B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in K. N. Cameron and D. H. Reiman (eds), *Shelley and His Circle*, 10 vols to date (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1961–), VI, pp. 961–1065 (p. 978).

23 Quoted in J. Hoffmeister, ‘Goethe und die französische Revolution’, *Goethe: Viermonatsschrift der Goethe-Gesellschaft* 6 (1941), 138–68 (p. 139). In 1794, having rejected the Revolution, Gentz translated Burke’s *Reflections* into German, and in 1812 he became an adviser to Metternich.

of the decade, the synecdochical relation between the concept of revolution and the French instantiation of it became increasingly problematic for intellectuals who wished to retain a positive valuation of the former. They therefore sought to isolate the French case from other possible revolutions, as it were drawing a conceptual *cordon sanitaire* around a situation that was proving politically and militarily uncontainable.

One way of doing this, adopted by Friedrich Schlegel, was to individualise the French Revolution as the inevitable result of the inherently unstable mixture of elements constituting the nation.²⁴ Another way, adopted variously by Louis-Sébastien Mercier and Germaine de Staël, was to distinguish between true and false revolution, the latter being a corruption of or deviation from the former. In the 1798 preface to a new edition of his bestselling 1771 novel *The Year 2440* – which projected into that distant future a Paris governed by Enlightenment principles of rationality, tolerance, and equality – Mercier claimed credit for having predicted the transformations that the Revolution was *supposed* to produce, while he attributed its ‘crimes’ (of which, as a member of the moderate Girondin faction, he had nearly become a victim) to avarice and foreign interference. For her part, despite conceding that the Revolution marked ‘a new era for the intellectual world’, Staël maintained that the bad taste prevalent under it was in fact impeding the French *literary* revolution that, conjoined with *l’esprit républicain*, had begun earlier with Montesquieu, Rousseau, and the Abbé Étienne Bonnot de Condillac.²⁵

A third way, adopted as I shall discuss presently by Friedrich Schiller and Percy Bysshe Shelley, was to make the French Revolution itself the object of a kind of transcendental enquiry, analysing the causes of its perceived failure in order to determine under what conditions political reform could succeed. Such an analysis needed neither to deny a demand for revolution nor to exclude the possibility of it, but on the contrary would admit both as prerequisites to, rather than the means of, political action. By creating the intellectual and moral conditions that the Enlightenment, owing to the disparity between its principles and realities, had proved unable to establish, conditions supportive of gradual and genuine political reform, a revolution in the mind would render a revolution in the streets unnecessary.

24 F. Schlegel, ‘Athenaeumsfragmente’ no. 424 (1798), in *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. E. Behler, 30 vols to date (Paderborn, Schöningh, 1958–), II, p. 248.

25 L.-S. Mercier, *L’an deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s’il en fût jamais*, 3 vols (Paris, 1798), I, pp. ii, xxii; G. de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 2 vols (Paris, 1799), II, pp. 48, 70–1.

Transcendental critique in this sense – a version of which Friedrich Schlegel too undertook – provided the basis for formulating an intellectual and cultural programme that deferred resolution of the political discontents unaddressed or indeed exacerbated by the French Revolution. However naive the assumption may have been that radical intellectual transformation could compensate for disillusionment with the French situation, the programmes advocated by Schiller, Schlegel, and Shelley, although certainly addressed to educated elites, did not involve anything as simple as the substitution of aesthetic quietism for political activism.

Before turning to these three writers, however, I want briefly to consider the equivocations of the two most significant philosophers for German Romanticism, Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, with regard to the relation of transcendental philosophy to the French Revolution. Kant compared his transcendental turn to a specifically scientific revolution, and in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* [The Metaphysics of Morals] (1797) he disallowed the legitimacy of a revolutionary remedy for a 'defective constitution'. In response to the mathematician August Wilhelm Rehberg's accusation, in his *Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution* [Examination of the French Revolution] (1793), that 'metaphysics' was responsible for the Revolution, Kant noted sarcastically that this was to give metaphysics undeserved credit, since statesmen were accustomed to dismiss it as nothing but scholastic pedantry. Yet he did maintain that a priori principles, specifically religious and civil freedom, can be actualised.²⁶ And in *Der Streit der Fakultäten* [The Conflict of the Faculties] (1798), a collection of three essays written in the mid-1790s but publishable only after the death of the reactionary Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm II, he obliquely suggested an affinity between the transcendental philosophy and the French cause. In the first essay Kant asserted the right of philosophy, the so-called 'lower faculty' in German universities, to rule over the 'higher faculties' of theology, law, and medicine because only philosophy – being grounded in and answerable to reason alone, as opposed to authority or convention – was truly free and hence had truth rather than utility as its object. In the second essay he argued that whatever the actual outcome of the French Revolution (about which he was sceptical), public enthusiasm for its goal of a republican constitution was itself 'epoch-making' in providing empirical confirmation of reason's recognition

26 Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XXIII, p. 127; I. Kant, 'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice' (1793), in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 273–310 (pp. 297–304).

of a concept of freedom grounded in nothing but itself. These arguments were compatible with the revolutionary economist Pierre Louis Roederer's vindication of modern philosophy against the royalist charge that its *esprit d'analyse* was destructive of all religion (the same charge that Moses Mendelssohn had famously levelled against Kant): without condemning or destroying any religion, Roederer insisted, philosophy reunited under its own auspices politics and morality, which religion had unjustly sought to claim for itself.²⁷

For his part, Fichte credited the *Critique of Pure Reason* with having produced a 'revolution in [his] whole way of thinking', enabling him to 'believe wholeheartedly in the freedom of mankind'.²⁸ But while sharing Kant's conviction of human autonomy, he accused the philosopher of having created his own obstacle to intellectual self-emancipation by postulating unknowable things-in-themselves as the causes of experience. Only once this metaphysical vestige was removed could the critical philosophy become an instrument of political liberation. By radicalising Kant's transcendental turn and grounding the possibility of knowledge solely in self-consciousness – as the subject's positing of itself as an object in non-sensible 'intellectual intuition' – Fichte sought to establish that the very act of thinking confirms human freedom: 'What does not exist for itself is not an I . . . The I exists only to the extent that it is conscious of itself.'²⁹ Because the individual subject does not exist alone, however, it can attain complete autonomy only inter-subjectively, through the collective effort to constitute what Fichte called the absolute subject. Thus, the recognition of autonomy as the condition of thought entails a moral responsibility to realise freedom socially and politically.

If Kant developed his practical philosophy after his theoretical philosophy, Fichte did more nearly the reverse, first recognising the practical application of the concept of autonomy and subsequently trying to provide a sounder

27 I. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. M. J. Gregor and R. Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 233–328 (pp. 255–6 and 302–4); P.-L. Roederer, *De la philosophie moderne et de la part qu'elle a eue à la Révolution française* (Paris, 1799), pp. 7–8. See also Simon Swift's discussion of this in Chapter 6.

28 J. G. Fichte to H. N. Achelis, November 1790, in *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. R. Lauth and H. Jacob, 41 vols (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1962–2012), XXVIII, p. 193.

29 J. G. Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), in *Gesamtausgabe*, II, p. 260. For a thorough explanation of the relationship between Fichte's epistemology and politics, see F. C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992), ch. 3.

epistemological foundation for it than Kant himself had. Before publishing the first expositions of his *Wissenschaftslehre* in late 1794, Fichte published anonymously two works addressing the French Revolution, *Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europas* [Reclamation of Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe] (1793) and the two-part *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* [Contribution to Correcting the Public's Judgements of the French Revolution] (1793–4). Both works anticipated Kant's own political writings in maintaining that constitutions can and should be based on principles derived from reason, as opposed to tradition, as Rehberg and Burke insisted. But while the *Reclamation* advocated 'gradual progress towards greater enlightenment' as more reliable than violent revolution, the *Contribution* – a reply to Rehberg's *Examination* – took a far more radical position than Kant could countenance, affirming not only a right but a duty to revolution, at least in the face of implacable opposition to reform. In a similar manner to Wollstonecraft, Fichte argued that a constitution contrary to the spirit of humanity (*Geist der Menschheit*) must be changed.³⁰ Insofar as the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a 'system of freedom', developed out of this defence of the legitimacy of the French Revolution, Fichte declared in the spring of 1795 that it belonged to the French: '[T]heir *valeur* inspired me and gave me the energy I needed to grasp it.'³¹

Others, of course, did not share Fichte's optimism that the philosophical recognition of human freedom as a rational principle would suffice as the impetus for the political actualisation of that principle. Though himself in favour of republican government, Friedrich Schiller deplored the means by which the French had created theirs. The Revolution had brought the question of governance 'before the tribunal of pure reason', as he acknowledged in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* [Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man] (1795), which developed ideas already expressed in letters of 1792–3 and was written during the Terror. But the Revolution had also failed to 'make true freedom the basis of political associations', and worse yet had reduced the populace to brutality. It was evident that although mankind had awakened from its long torpor – Schiller here echoing the rhetoric of Kant's 'What Is Enlightenment?' – and was

30 J. G. Fichte, *Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europas*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, I, pp. 163–92 (p. 169); *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, I, pp. 203–404 (p. 254).

31 Draft letter to Jens Baggesen, April/May 1795, in *Gesamtausgabe*, XXIX, pp. 297–9 (p. 298).

demanding 'the restitution of its inalienable rights', this goal remained unachievable because the necessary moral (in contrast to physical) conditions were lacking.³²

The Terror, about which Schiller read in French newspapers, crushed his hopes for the French Revolution and provoked him to question the relation of practical reason to practical politics, much as France's declaration of war against Britain in January 1793 had turned Wordsworth against the French cause and prompted him to distinguish revolution from enlightenment – 'neither lapse / Nor turn of sentiment that might be named / A revolution save at this one time, / All else was progress' (X.235–8) – and to question the possibility of establishing a constitution on purely rational principles – 'When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights / When most intent on making of herself / A prime Enchanter to assist the work / Which then was going forwards in her name' (X.697–700).³³ But whereas *The Prelude* recounts Wordsworth's questionings without itself analysing the reasons for the Revolution's failure, the *Aesthetic Letters* proceed from just such an analysis. A private letter of July 1793, in which Schiller accused the Enlightenment of being 'mere theoretical culture' and of tending to systematise depravity, served as the foundation for the transcendental critique of contemporary society in the public *Letters*.³⁴

Examining what would enable political reform to be successful, Schiller identified in the progress of reason itself the cause of the disjunction between the rational and moral aim of a 'state of freedom' and the irrational and immoral means of trying to create that state. 'Enlightenment of the understanding' had repressed sensibility and increasing knowledge had encouraged severe social stratification, resulting in the alienation of individuals both from themselves and from the state (5th and 6th letters; 580–4). Reason's presumption, in denying the sensuous aspect of human nature and promoting a strictly abstract idea of the state, had frustrated the realisation of its laws. What was needed, therefore, was mediation between nature and intellect, sensuousness and rationality, feeling and abstraction. This mediating function, according to Schiller, fell to aesthetic experience, defined as the

32 F. Schiller, *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. P.-A. Alt, A. Meier, and W. Reidel, 5 vols (Munich, DTV, 2004), V, 5th letter, pp. 579–80. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

33 W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805–6), in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. N. Halmi (New York, Norton, 2013), pp. 161–380 (book and lines cited parenthetically).

34 F. Schiller to F. C. von Augustenburg, 13 July 1793, in *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, ed. J. Peterson and L. Blumenthal, 42 vols to date (Weimar, Böhlau, 1943–), XXVI, p. 263.

sensuous appreciation of beauty as pure form – that is, form perceived to be fully determined by laws inherent to it, without regard to content. Such appreciation would, by directing sensuousness to the *idea* of freedom and reason to the *appearance* of freedom, bring rational discipline to the one and empirical effectiveness to the other (23rd letter; 642–3).

Because, Schiller asserted in his second letter, ‘art is the daughter of freedom’, subject in principle solely to the dictates of the mind, and beauty is the means through which mankind ‘moves towards freedom’, the only solution to the ‘problem of practical politics’ was an aesthetic one (573): achieving ‘freedom by means of freedom’ (27th letter; 667).³⁵ But that goal could not be reached, Schiller warned, until aesthetics itself was purified of any instrumentalism – a manifestation of human subjugation to the material world. Following Kant, he insisted on the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience, but as a regulative ideal. If political reform required aesthetic education, then aesthetic education for its part required nothing less than ‘a total revolution in [mankind’s] entire way of feeling’ (27th letter; 662). Unlike some of his contemporaries, Schiller recuperated the concept of revolution, in the face of the Terror, not by isolating it from politics – on the contrary – but by displacing it from the present, in a series of public letters addressed as it were to the future.

In the *Athenaeum*, the periodical edited with his brother August Wilhelm from 1798 to 1800 and now considered a foundational work of early German Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel provocatively identified the French Revolution, Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship] (1795–6) as ‘the three greatest tendencies of the age’ (AF no. 216; 198–9).³⁶ This juxtaposition not only relativised the Revolution, denying it the status of incomparability, but conceded collective political action no greater significance than individual intellectual achievement. Those, Schlegel scolded, who might take offence at his juxtaposition because they could not take seriously any revolution that was not ‘noisy and tangible [materiell]’ had not yet attained a sufficiently ‘broad perspective on the history of mankind’. For a ‘small book, little noticed by the rabble at the time’ can have a greater cultural impact than anything they do. In his essay ‘Über die Unverständlichkeit’ [On

35 Schiller’s claim for beauty here is probably indebted to Kant’s argument, in §49 of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), that beauty can serve as a symbol of morality.

36 F. Schlegel’s ‘Fragmente’ and ‘Ideen’ from the *Athenaeum* are cited parenthetically, after the abbreviation AF or I, by fragment number and page number of volume II of the *Kritische Ausgabe*.

Incomprehensibility] (1800), which closed the periodical's last issue, Schlegel explained that in his 'extremely subjective' view the French Revolution was 'a splendid allegory of the system of transcendental idealism'. But as an idealistic *Tendenz*, seeking to enact the rational principles of republicanism, the Revolution remained incomplete – as did everything in this 'age of tendencies'.³⁷

If the general aim of the *Athenaeum*, as announced in the editors' preface to the first issue, was to contribute to *Bildung* – that is, to education or the formation of character – then the particular task of criticism, as defined in 'On Incomprehensibility', was to apply itself to what had thus far escaped scrutiny, the present age itself, which deserved its 'modest but telling name of the Critical Age'.³⁸ Though Schlegel in the 1790s favoured republicanism, his ideal of a republican constitution changed between 1796, when, under the spell of Fichte's philosophy and personality, he published an essay advocating democracy with universal adult franchise as the closest approximation to the notional 'general will' from which a republic derives its legitimacy, and the final years of the decade, when, having distanced himself from Fichte and been impressed by Schiller's aesthetic essays, he published the *Athenaeum*.³⁹ For one thing, he became convinced that 'the educated ought to outweigh and lead the uneducated', and that the 'perfect republic ought to be not merely democratic but simultaneously aristocratic and monarchic' as a safeguard against mob rule (AF no. 214; 198). For another, he became convinced that the moral education of the populace can only precede, rather than follow, the establishment of republican government. The failure of the French Revolution in this respect was one reason that it was not, contrary to 'the usual viewpoints', to be regarded as 'the prototype of revolutions, as revolution in general', but instead as a uniquely French affair (AF no. 242; 247–8). In contrast to the many who unhesitatingly declared the Revolution to have inaugurated a new world-historical epoch, Schlegel insisted on the need for interpretive restraint, for the character of an age becomes evident only in

37 F. Schlegel, 'Über die Unverständlichkeit' (1800), in *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, pp. 363–72 (p. 367). See also F. Schlegel, 'Zur Philosophie' (1797) no. 662, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, XVIII, p. 85.

38 A. W. Schlegel and F. Schlegel (eds), *Athenaeum: Eine Zeitschrift* I.1 (1798), iii; F. Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, pp. 364–5.

39 F. Schlegel, 'Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus', in *Kritische Ausgabe*, VII, pp. 11–25, esp. pp. 16–17, on which see Beiser, *Enlightenment*, pp. 250–2. The extent of Schiller's influence on Schlegel has been much debated: for a balanced account see E. Behler, 'Die Wirkung Goethes und Schillers auf die Brüder Schlegel', in *Studien zur Romantik und zur idealistischen Philosophie* (Paderborn, Schöningh, 1988), pp. 264–82.

relation to the one that succeeds it, and in 1798 it was not yet possible even to anticipate what that would be (AF no. 426; 248).

Schlegel was certain, however, that the contemporary age needed 'an intellectual [or spiritual, *geistiges*] counterweight against the Revolution [die Revolution] and against the despotism that it exercises over people's minds [Geister]' (I no. 41; 259). This counterweight, he immediately volunteered, was to be found 'indisputably in ourselves, and whoever who has grasped the core [Zentrum] of humanity here will also have discovered the focal point [Mittelpunkt] of modern *Bildung* and the harmony of all hitherto isolated and conflicting sciences and arts'. Already in the 'Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus' [Essay on the Concept of Republicanism] (1796), Schlegel had emphasised that modern political culture lacked a sense of moral community, and encouraging the formation of a cohesive, harmonious community of free individuals was a fundamental motivation of the *Athenaeum*. Yet this goal was to be pursued in the first instance not politically but philosophically and artistically: 'Do not squander faith and love on the political world, but offer your inmost being [*Innerstes*] to the divine world of science and art in the sacred fiery stream of *Bildung*' (I no. 106; 266). In the final 'Athenaeumsfragment' Schlegel asserted obscurely that 'the life of the universal mind [or spirit, *Geist*] is an unbroken chain of inner revolutions; all individuals – namely, the original, eternal ones – live eternally in it' (AF no. 451; 255). The manuscript draft of this statement suggests that Schlegel conceived universality to be a condition that the individual mind achieves, if never fully, through a continuous process of conscious self-questioning and self-correcting: 'The inner being [*Innres*] of a person who has reached a certain level and universality of *Bildung* is a perpetual chain of the most enormous revolutions.'⁴⁰

To the extent that Schlegel sought in the *Athenaeum* to instigate 'revolutions' in the minds of cultivated readers, he was updating the concept of 'aesthetic revolution' that he had advanced in his book-length essay *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* [On the Study of Greek Poetry], written in 1795 but only published two years later, owing to delays by the printer, in his two-volume study *Die Griechen und Römer: Historische und kritische Versuche über das Klassische Alterthum* [The Greeks and Romans: Historical and Critical Essays on Classical Antiquity]. In that essay the concept had functioned both diagnostically and programmatically, referring at once to what Schlegel considered a crisis in the development of modern literature and to

40 F. Schlegel, 'Zur Philosophie' (1797) no. 637, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, XVIII, pp. 82–3.

what he proposed as the resolution to the crisis. Developing according to 'artificial' principles (as opposed to the 'natural' principles that enabled Greek literature to attain perfection and constitute an organic totality), modern literature was preoccupied either with a sterile imitation of the ancients or with individuality and novelty – with being 'interesting', in the sense of producing striking subjective effects, and 'interested', in the sense of serving didactic or other non-artistic purposes.⁴¹ (There is an obvious, though unconscious, parallel between Schlegel's critique of novelty as a literary value and Wordsworth's castigation of the 'degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation' that contemporary literature sought to satisfy.)⁴² As a consequence of these preoccupations, modern literature in the aggregate was very heterogeneous, 'like a sea of conflicting forces' (223), and incapable of providing the basis for a genuinely *communal* culture. In contrast, Greek literature was productive of 'the beautiful' – which Schlegel, recalling Kant's and Schiller's insistence on the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience, defined as 'the universal object [Gegenstand] of a disinterested pleasure' – because it possessed 'objectivity', a quality encompassing 'the universal [das Allgemeingültige], the enduring, and the necessary' (252–4, 267).

Already in 1795 Schlegel's understanding of Greek culture was sufficiently historicist for him to recognise that the formal imitation of ancient models would not enable modern artists to recover the cultural cohesion whose loss he lamented. For that reason, he was, like his brother, critical of Enlightenment neoclassical literature. But he clearly hoped that the *study* of Greek literature would inspire his generation to become self-critical and discover its own path away from chaos and lawlessness – with which Schlegel claimed to sense a growing fatigue (224, 268) – and towards objectivity. This self-critical turn would be a 'benevolent revolution' (223–4), not least, as Schlegel hardly needed to say, by virtue of not being directly political. If modern literature required an 'aesthetic revolution . . . through which the objective could become dominant in aesthetic *Bildung*' (269), it also enabled one, for its nature, unlike that of Greek literature, was precisely to be always incomplete, always striving for something – in short, capable of further development, of *Bildung* (a word that appears no fewer than 213 times in the essay). One prerequisite of this revolution, 'aesthetic force' or 'aesthetic energy', was already to be found in contemporary literature; the second,

41 F. Schlegel, 'Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie', in *Kritische Ausgabe*, I, pp. 217–367, esp. pp. 228, 241–3, and 252–3 (hereafter cited parenthetically).

42 See also W. Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 76–96 (p. 81).

'legislation' ('Gesetzgebung') or a normative aesthetic theory, was still lacking (271–2). But to gain public assent, and hence actually become normative, theory had to be complemented empirically by an 'aesthetic prototype' (273–4). Separated from an analysis of Greek literature, this call for a self-conscious alignment of critical principles and artistic practice then became an important theme in Schlegel's contributions to the *Lyceum of the Fine Arts*, a short-lived journal published by the composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt in 1797, and to the *Athenaeum* itself.

To be sure, there was no more talk of an aesthetic revolution. Abandoning his assumption of the transhistorical normativity of the objectivity with which he had previously credited Greek literature – and indeed remarking self-ironically that 'everyone has found in the ancients what he needed or wished' (AF no. 151; 189) – Schlegel now sought to draw out the aesthetic implications of transcendental philosophy, the contemporary development of which by Kant and Fichte he described privately, in his notebooks, as 'a revolution and revolutionary', not least in its rapidity.⁴³ Between 1796 and 1798 Schlegel, like his friend Novalis, had become increasingly critical of the foundationalism of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*: by grounding his theory of knowledge in an unknowable first principle – the subject's act of self-positing in intellectual intuition – Fichte was dogmatically reifying an epistemological assumption into an ontological reality and thus confusing the transcendental with the transcendent.⁴⁴ The unconditioned or absolute, Schlegel argued, is what philosophy strives towards but can never grasp, a regulative ideal, for knowledge is always conditioned by the empirical realities of human existence. No philosophical system can be complete, and every system participates in the continuing development of reflective thought, which is to say in a form of *Bildung*. Philosophical self-reflexivity therefore entails cultivating both a transcendental and an historical awareness, the one to understand the discipline's provisionality in principle and the other to understand its provisionality at a given time. For his part Schlegel proposed to incorporate groundlessness into philosophy methodologically by replacing a fixed first principle, as in Fichte's system, with what he called, misleadingly, a 'reciprocal proof' ('Wechselerweis'), by which he meant constantly alternating opposed

43 F. Schlegel, 'Philosophische Fragmente' (1798) no. 492, and 'Philosophische Fragmente' (1800–1) no. 614, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, XVIII, pp. 69 and 371.

44 See N. Halmi, 'Romantic Thinking', in P. Vassilopoulou and D. Whistler (eds), *Thought: A Philosophical History* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2021), pp. 61–74.

principles, such as finitude and infinitude.⁴⁵ A duality of fundamental principles would better reflect the dynamic nature of human consciousness and the necessarily relational nature of human knowledge.

In one of his *Lyceum* fragments Schlegel recognised a connection between philosophical foundationalism and his own prior aesthetic foundationalism: 'The revolutionary rage of objectivity [Objektivitätswut] of my earlier philosophical scores [Musikalien] has something of that rage for foundations [Grundwut] which increased so powerfully during [the early 1790s] in philosophy.'⁴⁶ Having rejected the possibility of a first principle in philosophy, he could no longer assert, as he had done in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, 'a transcendental principle of modern poetry'.⁴⁷ The programme Schlegel advanced in the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* extended his philosophical anti-foundationalism to aesthetics in two crucial respects: first, in the demand that literature (his term *Poesie* encompassing both verse and prose) assimilate critical self-reflexiveness formally by merging 'transcendental materials and preliminaries for a poetic theory of literary power with artistic reflection', thus creating a 'poetry of poetry' (AF no. 238; 204); second, in the definition of 'romantic poetry' ('romantische Poesie'), meaning essentially modern literature, as constantly in development and incapable of completion, 'a progressive universal poetry' (AF no. 116; 182–3). In place of a transcendental principle of poetry, then, Schlegel advocated a 'transcendental poetry' ('Transzendentalpoesie'), the essence of which he defined, by implicit analogy to his *Wechselerweis*, as consisting in a dynamic 'relation of the ideal and the real' (AF no. 238; 204). And just as transcendental philosophy must be critically self-aware, representing 'the producer with the product', so must transcendental poetry, representing itself in everything it represents.

Schlegel's concept of *Transzendentalpoesie* has been cited as evidence that he 'abolished the distinction between philosophy and poetry'.⁴⁸ But while he did envision an *eventual* fusion of the two (AF no. 451; 255), his fragment on *Transzendentalpoesie* itself conceded only an analogy between them and proposed rather a blending of literature with literary criticism. Insofar as

45 F. Schlegel, 'Philosophische Fragmente' (1797–98) no. 193, and 'Zur Logik und Philosophie' (1796) no. 22, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, XVIII, pp. 7, 521.

46 F. Schlegel, 'Kritische Fragmente' no. 66, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, p. 155 (hereafter cited parenthetically by fragment and page number after the abbreviation L).

47 R. Brinkmann, 'Deutsche Frühromantik und Französische Revolution', in R. Brinkmann et al. (eds), *Deutsche Literatur und Französische Revolution* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck, 1974), pp. 172–91 (p. 179).

48 E. Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 204.

philosophy was supposed to serve as 'a theoretical preparation' for the poet's attainment of critical self-distance,⁴⁹ there was unsurprisingly a formal resemblance between Schlegel's models of the *Wechselerweis* and of *romantische Poesie*, the latter of which he characterised memorably as hovering 'between the represented and the representing . . . on the wings of poetic reflection', raising reflection continually to a higher power and multiplying it 'as in an endless series of mirrors' (AF no. 116; 182–3). Philosophy and poetry were distinct but complementary in his programme, philosophy supplying poetry with the self-reflexiveness necessary for it to fulfil its nature of continuous development (as opposed to a formal fixity such as neoclassicism prescribed, the aesthetic equivalent of dogmatism), and poetry representing – if necessarily indirectly – the absolute that always eludes the efforts of philosophy to comprehend it systematically. In the *Athenaeum* he stated unequivocally, 'Where philosophy ceases, poetry must begin . . . One should oppose philosophy not only to non-philosophy [Unphilosophie], for example, but to poetry' (I no. 48; 261). What Schlegel famously theorised as irony, now commonly referred to as 'Romantic irony', is a philosophical attitude of self-conscious epistemological modesty: 'a feeling of an indissoluble conflict of the unconditioned and the conditioned, of the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication' (L no. 108; 160). What he theorised as allegory is the aesthetic manifestation of irony – a self-conscious representation of the impossibility of representing the absolute directly: 'Precisely because it is inexpressible, the highest [Höchste] can be expressed only allegorically,' Schlegel's spokesman Ludoviko explained in the 'Dialogue on Poetry' that appeared in the final issue of the *Athenaeum*.⁵⁰ Allegory makes the absolute intuitable, though only in its elusiveness.

Schlegel's conception of Romantic poetry was simultaneously descriptive and normative, encompassing what he thought modern and more particularly contemporary literature was by its nature and what it ought to be, an expression of the age and a response to the age's needs. He characterised it as having a unifying function, not only formally – in the reunification of genres and the fusion of poetry with prose and of creativity with criticism – but socially: 'It seeks to, and should . . . make poetry vital and social [gesellig], and life and society [Gesellschaft] poetic' (AF no. 116; 182). Because it is always developing and never completed, Romantic poetry is necessarily a communal

49 M. Oergel, *Culture and Identity: Historicity in German Literature and Thought 1770–1815* (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 80–1.

50 F. Schlegel, 'Gespräch über die Poesie' (1800), in *Kritische Ausgabe*, II, pp. 284–362 (p. 324; hereafter cited parenthetically).

endeavour, to which poets contribute in their individual ways, each actualising without exhausting its potentiality, anticipating Shelley's concept of the 'one great poem, which all poets . . . have built up since the beginning of the world'.⁵¹ Self-reflexivity, in which poets reflect on the very impossibility of representing the infinite world from a finite perspective at a given moment, attests therefore not to self-involvement but to the recognition of the need for ever more perspectives: 'Romantic poetry is among the arts what . . . society, sociability, friendship, and love are in life' (AF no. 116; 182).

Like Schiller, however, Schlegel was also attentive to what he perceived as contemporary social fragmentation and alienation, and in the 'Dialogue on Poetry' he called on poets to assume a more deliberate role in fostering social cohesion by creating an explicitly communal literature in the shape of a 'new mythology'. Because it was intended to serve the present age, this mythology could not be derived from classical mythology but had to be created consciously and artificially 'out of the deepest depths of the mind' (312, 313), which idealism had explored and – in what Schlegel granted was a 'great revolution' – made the unifying basis for humanity's multifaceted cultivation of its powers, including in physics (314). But certain as he was about the sources of its *content*, Schlegel could not offer specific advice about the mythology's *form*. Despite noting 'a great similarity' of mythology to Romantic poetry, 'which reveals itself not in individual ideas [Einfällen] but in the construction of the whole' (318), he resorted to advocating Greek and Indian models in order 'to accelerate the emergence of the new mythology' (319): 'Why will you not arise,' he addressed contemporary artists, 'and revive these magnificent forms [Gestalten] of great antiquity?' Classical mythology could no longer be the exclusive model for modern Germany, hence the need to study additional mythologies, but it did remain a model insofar as it was, from Schlegel's perspective, a successful mythology, providing a foundation for the whole of Greek culture and religion. Although Schlegel followed his own advice with respect to India, learning Sanskrit in Paris in 1802 and publishing a pioneering work of German Indology, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians] in 1808, he did not return to the project of the new mythology. Less an aspect of than a supplement to Romantic poetry, as Schlegel understood the latter, this was a project whose realisation, like that of Schiller's revolution in feeling, had to be deferred to the indefinite future.

51 P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. D. H. Reiman and N. Fraistat (New York, Norton, 2001), pp. 509–35 (p. 522).

Revolution or Reform? Percy Bysshe Shelley and Wordsworth

Two decades after Schiller, Shelley expressed a similar conviction that political reform cannot succeed if attempted suddenly, before a people have been intellectually and morally prepared for it. Although he considered both the American and French Revolutions to have been expressions of a legitimate 'state of public opinion' and acknowledged that the latter had managed to abolish some abuses, he nonetheless faulted the French for having resorted to violence and their *philosophes* for not having assisted the nation in liberating itself *morally* from the effects of despotism and oppression. In two pamphlets published during his visit to Dublin in February 1812, Shelley adduced the French as a caution to the Irish, observing on the one hand that the Revolution's good intentions were thwarted by its ill-chosen means and on the other hand that attempts to enact principles noble in themselves, such as of philanthropy and freedom, 'will end in bloodshed, vice, and slavery' if conditions receptive to their enactment – namely, the 'diffusion of true and virtuous principles' – do not yet exist.⁵² The implication was that although revolutions oppose and seek to remedy the discontents that provoke them, they fail because they are insufficiently discontinuous from those discontents. When truth uses the medium of lies, when liberators reciprocate the violence of oppressors, revolution mirrors rather than transforms the object of its efforts.

In the manuscript fragments that have been identified by his editors as belonging to an uncompleted philosophical essay of c. 1814–18, the so-called 'Speculations on Morals and Metaphysics', Shelley undertook, rather as Kant had, to liberate practical reason from dogmatic assumptions and assertions by testing moral principles against the conditions of human thought. While '[m]oral science itself is the doctrine of the voluntary actions of man as a sentient & social being', Shelley explained, those actions derive from 'thoughts in his mind'.⁵³ Regarding metaphysics from the perspective of a sceptical empiricism, the fundamental axioms of which were 'that we can

52 P. B. Shelley, 'An Address, to the Irish People', in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E. B. Murray, 1 vol to date (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), I, pp. 6–38 (p. 19); P. B. Shelley, 'Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists', in *Prose Works*, I, pp. 39–55 (pp. 51 and 54).

53 Bodleian MS. Shelley d.1, fols. 114r–114v, in *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition, with Full Transcriptions and Scholarly Apparatus*, ed. E. B. Murray, 23 vols (New York, Garland, 1986–2002), IV, pp. 331 and 333 (hereafter cited parenthetically by page number of the edition).

think of nothing which we have not perceived' and that all abstractions (including mathematical and poetic ideas) 'are no other than combinations which the intellect makes of sensations according to its own laws' (333), he identified the source of morality as being purely immanent, namely in the thinking subject: 'His own mind is his law; his own mind is all things to him.'⁵⁴ And because even enlightened persons are typically encumbered with 'a mass of popular opinion', the truth or falsehood of which has passed unexamined, no conclusions about moral conduct 'in the regulation of our own minds, or towards our fellow beings' can be reached until exactly such an examination has been conducted (333). Moral enquiry, therefore, must proceed from epistemological enquiry: 'Let us contemplate facts; let us in the great study of ourselves resolutely compel the mind to a rigid consideration of itself' (189). This transcendental examination, which Shelley referred to as 'metaphysics', would have the advantage over other 'sciences' of concerning itself not with external objects but with the mind itself (191). Understanding how the mind operates will enable us to scrutinise, and where necessary to reject, moral tenets and social practices that are perpetuated unreflectively by habit and sanctioned by custom: 'The irresistible laws of thought constrain us to believe that the limits of our actual ideas are not the actual limits of possible ideas' (347).

For Shelley, philosophers had failed to appreciate that man is not only a moral and intellectual 'but also, and preeminently, an imaginative being' (197). Imagination is essential to moral development because it is the faculty by which we identify with, and hence learn to sympathise with and attend to, the concerns of others.⁵⁵ The more individuals cultivate their imaginations, the more civilised and virtuous the society they constitute becomes:

Virtue is thus entirely a refinement of civilised life, a creation of the human mind or rather a combination which it has made according to elementary rules contained within itself, of the feelings suggested by the relations established between man & man . . . Imagination, or mind employed in prophetically delin[ing] its objects, is that faculty of human nature on which every gradation of its progress, nay every, the minutest change depends. (213, 215)

54 Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. c.4, fol. 185, in *Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, XXI, p. 197 (hereafter cited parenthetically by page number of the edition). For a fuller exposition of Shelley's epistemological and moral theory in the Irish pamphlets and 'Speculations', see T. A. Hoagwood, *Scepticism and Ideology: Shelley's Political Prose and Its Philosophical Context from Bacon to Marx* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1988), pp. 139–52.

55 For a fuller discussion of imaginative sympathy, see Chapter 4.

Thus, the mark of the degree of a society's civilisation is the extent of its members' sympathy for one another: 'The inhabitant of a highly civilised community will more acutely sympathise with sufferings & enjoyments of others than the inhabitant of a society of a less degree of civilisation' (213). Anticipating his vindication of the social value of literature in the 'Defence of Poetry', written in 1821, Shelley here attributed to poetry and philosophy the role of exercising the imagination. Yet to the extent that the sympathetic imagination could be cultivated through 'familiarity with the finest specimens of poetry & philosophy', he acknowledged that those with leisure for reading would be more civilised, and hence more virtuous, than those 'engaged in the less refined functions of manual labour' (213). The aesthetic philosophy presented in inchoate form in the 'Speculations' was to be developed more fully not only in the 'Defence' but even earlier, in Shelley's most ambitious poetical works of 1817–20 and in his longest, albeit unfinished, prose work, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, composed in 1819–20 but unpublished until 1920.

In September 1799 Samuel Taylor Coleridge had entreated Wordsworth to 'write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness'.⁵⁶ This was essentially the task that Shelley set for himself in *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, a romance epic composed not in blank verse but in nine-line Spenserian stanzas, and published in late 1817 but quickly suppressed and reissued, with omissions and revisions demanded by the publisher, under the title *The Revolt of Islam* (1818). Intended, as Shelley explained in a letter to a prospective publisher, to represent 'the *beau idéal* as it were of the French Revolution', the poem's central narrative – offered as a consolatory vision to the unnamed narrator despairing that 'the last hope of trampled France had failed' (1.1) – contrasts the love of the eponymous siblings, who struggle in vain to liberate Greece from Ottoman occupation, with the tyranny of the Ottoman ruler, who condemns them to death.⁵⁷ Although *Laon and Cythna* themselves are defeated by counter-revolutionary forces, the principles they

56 S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956–71), I, p. 527.

57 P. B. Shelley to an unidentified recipient, 13 October 1817, in *Letters*, I, p. 564; P. B. Shelley, *Laon and Cythna*, in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. D. H. Reiman, N. Fraistat, and N. Crook, 3 vols to date (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000–), III, pp. 109–322 (canto and stanza numbers cited parenthetically).

represent – ‘fearless love, and the pure law / Of mild equality and peace’ – will inspire future generations and eventually displace those ‘faiths which long have held the world in awe, / Bloody and false’ (4.15). In his three-thousand-word preface to the poem, Shelley opined that the present age was likely to be receptive to his vision of an alternative to violent revolution, for the revulsion that ‘seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution’ had subsided and it was no longer believed ‘that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries, were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquillity of freeman so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened’.⁵⁸

News of the Peterloo Massacre on 18 August 1819 and the attendant febrile political climate in England refocused Shelley’s attention on the dependence of political reform on moral maturity. In the *Philosophical View* he resumed and amplified the argument about the French Revolution that he had formulated in his early political pamphlets, the ‘Speculations’, and *Laon and Cythna*. That the Revolution was necessary, as the only means of freeing the French from the prolonged abuse to which their feudal system had subjected them, was exactly the reason that it largely failed. Being so conditioned by what it opposed, it could not avoid replicating the brutality of despotism. In that respect, then, the Revolution represented a failure of enlightenment in France:

Then the oppressed having been rendered brutal, ignorant, servile, and bloody, by long slavery, having had the intellectual thirst excited in them by the progress of civilization, satiated from fountains of literature poisoned by the spirit & the form of monarchy arose & took a dreadful revenge on their oppressors. Their desire to wreak revenge to this extent, in itself a mistake, a crime, a calamity, arose from the same source as their other miseries & errors, & affords an additional proof of the necessity of that long delayed change which it accompanied & disgraced.⁵⁹

In Shelley’s view, as he expressed it to Leigh Hunt on 1 May 1820, the ‘system of society’ needed to be ‘overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms’ – in other words, renovated morally and culturally – before there was any hope of effectual political change. The

⁵⁸ Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p. 114.

⁵⁹ P. B. Shelley, *Philosophical View*, in *Shelley and His Circle*, VI, pp. 978–9 (deletions omitted; hereafter cited parenthetically).

faith in the possibility of such renovation, though possessed only by 'a few select spirits', would be 'at once a prophecy & a cause' of the nation's future political transformation.⁶⁰ Assuming, in his conjunction of prophecy and cause, the identity of the conditions of cognition and action, Shelley articulated a characteristically Romantic concept of revolution in all but name, even if this revolution was to consist not in direct political action but in the preparation for it. In contemporary England, he affirmed in the *Philosophical View*, he saw grounds for optimism, even as the nation stood 'at a crisis in its destiny' (991). These grounds were not political, certainly, but cultural, inasmuch as the literature of the period, in opposition to the government and Established Church, evinced an even greater intellectual power and reformist sentiment than during the nation's 'last struggle for liberty', the Glorious Revolution. Echoing the rhetoric of Milton's impassioned defence of freedom of the press, *Areopagitica*, Shelley proclaimed that the 'literature of England, an energetic deve[lo]pement of which has ever followed or preceded a great & free development of the national will, has arisen, as it were, from a new birth' (991).

In conformity with his conviction that literature, broadly defined, was, through its exercising of the imagination, the most effectual instrument of inculcating virtue, at least in the educated classes – a qualification repeated in the *Philosophical View* (1056–7) – Shelley lauded contemporary poets and philosophers for simultaneously enabling and anticipating the social and political change that would follow from the recognition of 'the exceeding inefficiency of the existing institutions to provide for physical & intellectual happiness of the people' (993–4). This was the context in which he first drafted the sentences that were to become the famous conclusion to the 'Defence of Poetry': 'They are the priests of an unapprehended inspiration[,], the mirrors of gigantic forms which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they conceive not, the trumpet which sings to battle and feels not what it inspires[,], the influence which is moved not but moves. Poets & philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' (993).

Among Shelley's own poetic contributions to the intellectual revolution that he claimed in the *Philosophical View* to be witnessing were the contemporaneously composed and published dramas *The Cenci* (1819) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Presenting conflict with patriarchal tyranny, these works sought to illustrate, by means respectively of a negative and a positive example, the moral immaturity and practical ineffectuality of revenge,

60 Shelley, *Letters*, II, p. 191.

which Shelley described in the 'Defence' as 'the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age'.⁶¹ In the historical drama, Count Cenci's violation of his daughter Beatrice transforms her from one who, in her youth, had 'never trodden on a worm, or bruised / A living flower' (3.1.376–8) into one who, as commentators have noted, increasingly resembles her father in attitude and behaviour, internalising his assertion of her pollution while externalising his propensity for violence, so that by ordering his assassination she reveals herself to be most subjugated to him.⁶² Reciprocal violence is oppositional complicity. In Shelley's embellishment of the historical record, Beatrice learns moreover that her action is redundant, for the papal authorities had planned to arrest and execute Cenci (4.4.25–8). Although both Beatrice and her father are credited with possessing an anatomising gaze, an ability 'to analyse their own and other minds' (1.2.83–7, 2.2.208–12), in crucial respects she is deficient in 'self-anatomy', an exercise that Shelley defines in the play's preface as a moral duty: 'The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart . . . the knowledge of itself' (142). Precisely her failure to achieve such knowledge is meant to provoke us, the play's audience, to interrogate ourselves: 'It is in the restless and anatomising casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification . . . that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists' (142).

In the first act of the 'lyrical drama', Prometheus, confronted with phantasmic representations of his hatred of Jove, realises that '[w]hilst I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate / And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy' (1.449–51).⁶³ The French parallel is noted, albeit obliquely, in the Semichoruses' evocation of 'a disenchanted Nation' that 'Springs like day from desolation', motivated by the principles of truth and freedom, only to succumb to civil strife, 'Till Despair smothers / The struggling World – which slaves and tyrants win' (1.576–7). By contrast, what initiates the process not only of Prometheus's self-emancipation from the torment imposed on him by Jove (2.1.62–7), but also of the Olympian's downfall (3.2.63–70), is the Titan's repentance of his curse against Jove (1.303–5). This repentance is possible only because Prometheus has become conscious of how the curse, though intended as an act of defiance against Jove, manifests precisely his acceptance of

61 P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 510–35 (p. 516).

62 P. B. Shelley, *The Cenci* (1819), in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 138–202 (act, scene, and line numbers cited parenthetically).

63 P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 202–86 (act and line numbers cited parenthetically).

Jove's own system of values. Prometheus's moral progression from hatred to forgiveness of Jove, and then to love of the goddess Asia and benefaction to humanity in the form of the arts (3.3.4–63), creates the possibility of a vision, enunciated by the Spirit of the Hour, of an intellectually and politically reformed society in which *humans* are liberated from oppression, fear, and superstition: 'Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless, / Exempt from awe, worship, degree' (3.4.195–6). But Prometheus's absence from the fourth and final act emphasises that it is up to humans, not gods, to realise that world envisioned in the third act.⁶⁴ Addressed explicitly to 'the more select classes of poetical readers', as Shelley acknowledged in his preface, *Prometheus Unbound* was intended to offer them 'beautiful idealisms of moral excellence' (209). By this means he hoped to fulfil what he considered to be both the purpose of poetry – to create 'anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration', as he was to put it in the 'Defence of Poetry' (533) – and the prerequisite to successful social reform.

Shelley's profound ambivalence towards political revolutions generally and the French Revolution particularly is explicable at least partly by the fact that, having been born in 1792, he viewed the latter only retrospectively, as an event succeeded by the Napoleonic dictatorship and finally the Bourbon Restoration. But that temporal distance from the events of 1789 and their aftermath also assisted him in reconceiving revolution as a non-violent intellectual and moral transformation. For Wordsworth, who had travelled through France in the summer of 1790, lived there in 1791–2, and, like other politically radical Britons at the time, been profoundly disillusioned by the course that the Revolution had subsequently taken, this was not possible. When affirming 'the mind of Man' as his poetic theme in the closing lines of *The Prelude*, he implicitly aligned the French Revolution with the older concept of cyclical change in order to contrast permanent with temporary values: 'mid all the revolutions in the hopes / And fears of Men doth still remain unchanged' (13.449–50). In the late 1790s, certainly, the concept and more especially the rhetoric of revolution could hardly be separated from their ubiquitous association with France. In the advertisement to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and the preface to the second edition (1800), substantially expanded in the third edition (1802), he advertised what he regarded as the distinctiveness of his poems by adopting a more modestly pitched scientific rhetoric, which he must have hoped would also forestall

64 For a related point about the significance of Prometheus's absence, see H. Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 467.

hostile criticism: 'The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure' (1798, 8).⁶⁵ Although his emphasis shifted somewhat between 1798 and 1800 from the use of conversational diction to the choice of 'low and rustic' subject matter (1800, 78), Wordsworth was consistent in contrasting his poems with the kinds of literary works in popular favour, such as Gothic novels and melodramas, with their 'gaudiness and inane phraseology' (1798, 8; 1802, 77) and their predilection for 'gross and violent stimulants' (1800, 80). Far from claiming absolute novelty for the *Lyrical Ballads*, he defended them by asserting their commonality with 'our elder writers' (1798, 8, 9; cf. 1800, 81) and by denouncing the contemporary premium on 'false refinement and arbitrary innovation' (1800, 79).

What was at stake in Wordsworth's contestation of contemporary taste became evident in the prefaces of 1800 and more especially 1802. At the beginning and end of the former, first attributing it to unnamed friends and then acknowledging it as his own, he expressed the belief that if the principles on which the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* were composed 'were indeed realized, a class of Poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations' (1800, 76, 96). Placing 'taste and moral feeling' in conjunction (1802, 84), the substantial additions of 1802 elaborated more abstractly on the poet's qualification, by virtue of possessing greater imaginative capacity than the general populace, to fulfil poetry's responsibility of giving pleasure and exciting feeling precisely for the sake of expanding imaginative capacity in others. Low and rustic subjects and plain diction were for Wordsworth means of cultivating imaginative sympathy and hence of improving public morality, whereas the satisfaction of the demand of strong emotional stimuli for their own sake merely reinforced selfishness and social disengagement. Thus the reformation of popular taste was a matter of moral urgency: 'If my conclusions are admitted, and carried as far as they must be carried if admitted at all, our judgements concerning the works of the greatest Poets both ancient and modern will be far different from what they are at present . . . and our moral feelings influencing, and influenced by these judgements will, I believe, be corrected and purified' (1802, 85). Contrasting

65 The Advertisement and Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* are quoted from *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 8–9 and 76–96, with the date of the text and page numbers given parenthetically.

the poet with the scientist, Wordsworth exalted the former in terms that are likely to have been in Shelley's mind when he wrote the 'Defence of Poetry': 'He is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love . . . [T]he Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time' (1802, 88). In the only reference in the preface to revolution in its modern sense, and perhaps thinking of the chemist Humphry Davy, who in fact had corrected the proofs of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, Wordsworth allowed that 'the labours of Men of Science' might effect 'a material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition', in which case poets would familiarise the public with the new scientific achievements and as it were humanise them (1802, 88–9) – but he presented this scenario only hypothetically and chiefly to dispel charges of poetry's irrelevance to practical knowledge.

Wordsworth not only remained silent in the paratexts to *Lyrical Ballads* about the possible political implications of his poetic programme, but, as he informed the publisher of the second edition, he excluded some poems on 'political subjects' because he feared they would impair sales of the work.⁶⁶ It is true that he addressed politicians directly in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', and that he recommended 'The Brothers' and 'Michael' to Charles James Fox, leader of the Whig opposition to William Pitt's government, as representations of the 'domestic affections' of 'men of respectable education who daily labour on their own little properties'. But in both cases his aim was fundamentally *conservative*, whether to discourage the prohibition of begging (a measure debated in Parliament in the late 1790s) or to arrest the 'rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society' resulting from the dissolution of small inherited estates and the migration of sons to the cities.⁶⁷ Yet the insistently democratising tendency of the *Lyrical Ballads* – in their focus on quotidian occurrences and on marginalised figures such as beggars, vagrants, Gypsies, the mad, and the disabled – encouraged William Hazlitt, a critic whose sense of poetic decorum was as conservative as his politics were radical, to associate his former friend Wordsworth's poetic programme with the French Revolution. In both his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) and *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), Hazlitt reversed, so to speak, the direction of Wordsworth's own social contextualisation of his poetry,

66 W. Wordsworth to T. N. Longman, 18 December 1800, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2nd ed., ed. C. L. Shaver, M. Moorman, and A. G. Hill, 8 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967–93), I, p. 309.

67 W. Wordsworth to C. J. Fox, 14 January 1801, in *Letters*, I, pp. 312–15.

explaining its causes rather than its effects. The historical rupture represented by the Revolution, he argued, gave Wordsworth's Lake School of poetry the impetus for a correspondingly decisive rejection of poetic tradition for novelty and 'the utmost pitch of singularity and paradox' – precisely the qualities that Wordsworth had in fact deplored in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.⁶⁸ Thus the poet who presented his poetic reform less as an innovation than as the restoration of that literary dignity and moral value that had been usurped by contemporary taste found himself, through the critical application of the concept of revolution, described as 'a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age' – the age, that is, of revolution itself.

68 W. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, in *Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London, Dent, 1930–4), V, pp. 1–168 (pp. 161–2); W. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, in *Complete Works*, XI, pp. 1–184 (pp. 66–7).