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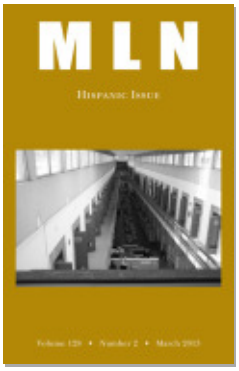

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Thomas Pfau

The fundamental Platonic equivocation, that the world of appearance is indeed the reproduced image of Ideas but cannot attain the perfection of the original, is resolved by Neoplatonism in favor of the second aspect: The world appears as the great failure to equal its ideal model. The metaphysical factor in this failure has been prescribed since Plato; it is the *hyle* [matter]. The difference between idea and substratum, between form and stuff, is increased in the Neoplatonic systems; to the *theologizing* of the Idea corresponds the *demonizing* of matter. What could at one time be conceived as the subjection of necessity to rational persuasion, namely, the formation of the world, is now the confinement of the world soul in the womb—or better: the prison—of matter. . . . All of this is still within the realm of discourse laid out by Plato, even if it does, as it were, exaggerate the metaphysical 'distances' in the original ground plan. . . . Gnosticism bears a more radical stamp. Even though it employs the Neoplatonist system, it nevertheless is not a consistent extension of that system but rather a reoccupation [*Umbesetzung*] of its positions. The demiurge has become the principle of badness, the opponent of the transcendent God of salvation who has nothing to do with bringing this world into existence. The world is the labyrinth of the *pneuma* [spirit] gone astray; as cosmos, it is the order opposed to salvation, the system of a fall. . . . The downfall of the world becomes the critical process of final salvation, the dissolution of the demiurge's illegitimate creation.[1]

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Ethic or Institution? Knowledge as Classical *eudaimonia* or Specialized Information

Early on in Ian McEwan's 1998 novel *Amsterdam*, protagonist and celebrity composer Clive Linley finds himself taking refuge from his comfortable upper-class West London flat and its predictable array of "design, cuisine, good wine, and the like." Seeking shelter from professional troubles within the poetically charged ambience of the Lake District, Clive first has to endure the passage by train out of North London, a transition that deepens his Gnostic sense of human civilization as an all-encompassing miscarriage. Languidly taking in "square miles of meager modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the televisions and, in dismal lots, lorries queuing to distribute it; and everywhere else, roads and the tyranny of traffic," Clive gradually distils all the inchoate perceptions into a dismal, all-encompassing allegory. What makes his desultory musings so poignant is, at least in part, their completely unpremeditated character, which so markedly contrasts with the strict means/end rationality governing and visibly misshaping the ambient bustle of economic life; these musings are at once utterly structured and yet entirely devoid of self-awareness:

> It looked like a raucous dinner party the morning after. No one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it, but most people had to live in it. To watch it mile after mile, who would have guessed that kindness or the imagination, that Purcell or Britten, Shakespeare or Milton, had ever existed? Occasionally, as the train gathered speed and they swung farther away from London, countryside appeared and with it the beginnings of beauty, or the memory of it, until seconds later it dissolved into a river straightened to a concreted sluice or a sudden agricultural wilderness without hedges or trees, and roads, new roads probing endlessly, shamelessly, as though all that mattered was to be elsewhere. As far as the welfare of every other living form on earth was concerned, the human project was not just a failure, it was a mistake from the very beginning.[2]

Intriguing about the passage is its emphasis on the particularity of quotidian life, the frenetic cycles of getting and spending, and the consequent denaturing of purposive organic form into mere vestiges of natural creation ("a sudden agricultural wilderness without hedges or trees"). A veritable allegory of late-modern capitalism run amok, the wasteland of North London impresses on Clive "the human proj-

ect" itself as an impossible one. And yet, by inadvertently echoing a key-axiom of ancient Gnostic speculation, Clive's sense of the material world as an all-encompassing, cosmic miscarriage ("a mistake from the very beginning") is also perplexing. For not only should this world, by all appearances, *never have been* in the first place, but the fact of its *manifest persistence* in spite of it all raises the question as to what value there might be left for speculative thinking and art in a world that has embraced instrumental rationality without any reserve.

Though likely unaware of how his weary meditations retrace Gnostic speculations almost two thousand years old, McEwan's protagonist, quietly dismayed by what he beholds, nonetheless conveys to us that the force and urgency of Gnostic speculation may indeed be undiminished. What if our hyper-reflexive and post-historical present should be the unwitting carrier of long dormant ideas and assumptions—not only incompatible with but positively in conflict with what Nietzsche had labeled modernity's "logical optimism"?[3] This logical optimisim single-mindedly embraces a fully instrumentalized, professionalized, and transactional model of rationality, and it continues to dominate our discourse networks and today's reigning conception of knowledge as a specialized, disciplinary, and institutionally embedded type of production. As this essay will argue, it is indeed the role of literature and criticism (in the strong, i.e., extra-professional, sense) to pose and explore questions of exactly the kind so vicariously broached by McEwan's dispirited hero. My principal exhibit of a thoroughgoing critique of modernity will be Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in turn framed by his wide-ranging prose writings, particularly *Aids to Reflection, Opus Maximum*, and the *Notebooks*.

Yet before taking up these materials, some broader and perplexing questions have to be addressed first. For any critical assessment of Coleridge's perspective on modernity as a metaphysical catastrophe—as opposed to a mere set of contingent political problems—is complicated by our own situation today. To begin with, as active members of a profession committed to and/or embedded in various political, religious, disciplinary, and institutional pursuits and practices, we ourselves are truly symptoms of the very modernity that Coleridge found so perturbing. There is the apparent fragmentation of knowledge into so many discrete institutional and disciplinary sub-specializations and, along with this fragmentation, the dominance of methodical analysis since the scientific revolutions wrought by Bacon, Descartes, and Newton. As Blake, Coleridge, Goethe, and Schopenhauer among others saw it, the gradual extension of modernity's analytic and methodical conception

of science to *all* areas of knowledge risks fragmenting the world as a whole, to the point that the resulting, utterly particular insight is all but certain to have eroded the human and spiritual significance of the knowledge so obtained. In Coleridge's own times, the most conspicuous instance of the ascendancy of methodical, specialized, and institutionally framed knowledge involved the overall dominance of historicism such as it variously shapes the emergent disciplines and sub-specializations of higher biblical criticism (Heyne, Eichhorn, Schleiermacher et al.), historical philology (Herder, Monboddo, Grimm, Bopp, Humboldt et al.), literary history (Herder, Schlegel, Coleridge, A. Menzel, H. Heine, et al.). Yet the increasing dominance of historicism as the very embodiment of method was also transforming philosophy itself, such that, after Kant, its paradigm of rationality (a.k.a. Logic) begins to edge away from a syllogistic, predicative conception of truth and a methodology largely steeped in demonstration by analogy (*more geometrico*). In its place, the early 1800s witness the emergence of an inherently dynamic, temporalized, or "liquefied" (Hegel's expression) paradigm of truth as a movement (*Bewegung*) taking reflexive possession of itself.[4] In charting the conversion of substance into subject, speculative idealism and dialectical materialism alike recast knowledge as the trans-generational and impersonal progression of History, which now functions as a kind of meta-subject.

In so aligning method, disciplinarity, and professionalization—a shift whose beginnings can be traced back to Bacon and Descartes—the scientific and epistemological project of European modernity gravitates towards a particularist conception of knowledge that curiously (albeit unwittingly) revives the nominalism of Abelard and Ockham. For an *a priori* commitment to historicism as a method sets inquiry on a course towards increasing specialization and professionalization such as will inexorably shrink the community for which one's findings can have any relevance at all. I say "findings," rather than "arguments," because implicit in Descartes' insistence on the primacy of method is the assumption that what legitimates argument is solely the impersonal process by which it is generated; hence, the success of an argument should owe nothing to the rhetorical charisma of its presentation and everything to the methodological ethos furnishing the evidence on which it rests. Implicitly, then, the charismatic and necessarily contingent force of rhetorical argument is steadily supplanted by the projection of an intersubjective consensus of expert knowledge ultimately pledged to affirm what must be, literally, "self-evident." Modernity's gradual journey from Cartesian skepticism via

Lockean empiricism to nineteenth-century positivism thus intensifies the Nominalist creed that reality consists only of individual things. Culminating in nineteenth-century Historicism's conception of knowledge as the methodical disaggregation of proper names, dates, and locales, such a position does indeed appear irrefutable inasmuch as it is free of any extrinsic premises; yet by the same token it is also pointless or empty since the "knowledge" so produced no longer advances any contestable proposition.

In the strident characterization offered by Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment thus constitutes "a nominalist movement" destined to lead its adherents to the threshold of an extreme particularity: "the *nomen*, the exclusive, precisely tailored concept, the proper name [*dem umfanglosen, punktuellen Begriff, dem Eigennamen*]." However dissimilar their expressive registers, both the proper name and the nominalist concept employ the same strategy of self-legitimation inasmuch as they seek to render intelligible (and so redeem) the matter of history by recasting it as something as yet insufficiently differentiated. For a radically empiricist method, "the guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion . . . [and] the contesting of every positive without distinction."[5] A notebook entry by Coleridge from October 1809 identifies modernity's programmatic disaggregation of knowledge and relevance, fact and value, authenticity and belief—a development whose myriad implications Coleridge was to ruminate over the coming decades with growing dismay:

> It is not that the Philosophy of the Fathers or moderate *Realists* is more abstruse or difficult to be believed than that of the Nominalists & *Materialists* (who are indeed *the true Realists*) so far from it that the philosophy of Plato & his systematic followers is only a display of the *possibility* of that which Mankind in general believe to be *real*—such as, that there is some ground in *Nature* or a common essence why Peter & John are two *men*/whereas the Philosophy of the Nominalists is abhorrent from all the common feelings of all mankind—but this it is, that gives the latter its fashion & favor—that . . . it consists in unbelieving as far as possible—till we come to *words* that convey all their separate meanings at once, no matter how incomprehensible or absurd the *collective* meaning may be—for the collective meaning cannot be inquired after but by an effort of Thought—and to avoid this is the aim of those who embrace this philosophy.[6]

Most troubling for Coleridge is how Modernity's disciplinary, institutional, and accumulative paradigm of inquiry has effectively abandoned the ancient notion of knowledge as an instantaneous and fortuitous

convergence of *theoria* and *eudaemonia* in a given individual's *vita contemplativa*.[7] In its classical, Aristotelian understanding, *theoria* had constituted an essentially individual and contemplative relation to the cosmos, one notably accompanied by a sense of wonder (*thaumazein*). Implicitly, the classical notion of *theoria* also posited that "truth in its totality was at the disposition of the individual" and, as a further consequence, that there had to be a strong "association of eudemonia with theory" (*LMA* 239). Beginning with the Socratic emphasis on self-knowledge, the therapeutic conception of Hellenistic thought (e.g., the *ataraxia* of the Stoics), as well as St. Augustine's and Tertullian's anti-Gnostic delimitation of knowledge to matters such as pertain to salvation—echoed in a number of modern figures, such as Pascal and "the greatest modern Augustinian, Heidegger"—the pursuit of theory is framed by "the general suspicion that the temptation to know the material world risks the loss of one's soul."[8]

By contrast, what Jürgen Mittelstrass calls modernity's "reflected" or self-conscious model of "theoretical curiosity" no longer unfolds as the humanistic care of the self, just as it is no longer circumscribed by a sense of metaphysical humility. Furthermore, it harbors no expectation of "wonder," such as would imply some impending, all-consuming revelation. Instead, modern theory is forever fixated on the "never-ending question of what will come next."[9] Hence, as Adorno and Horkheimer note with reference to Galileo, Bacon, and Leibniz, "number became the canon of Enlightenment" broadly speaking, such that "the Galilean mathematization of the world" dissolves the identity of objects into "a world of idealities" ultimately bound to supplant nature's material processes with "a rational, systematically unified method . . . a process of infinite progression" (*DE* 25). This accumulative or "encyclopedic" impulse accounts for and defines the institutional, professional, and corporate structure of modern intellectual work where "thought inevitably becomes a commodity" that seems "blindly pragmatized" (*DE* xi–xii). While the resulting paradigm of knowledge as a specialized commodity "can no longer be surveyed and taken in all at once," it is now being framed by institutional "higher-level agencies [*Übersubjekte*]" that inevitably confront the modern producer of knowledge with a permanent and troubling "disproportion between what has been achieved in the way of theoretical insight into reality and what can be transmitted to the individual for his use in orienting himself in his world."[10]

A crucial consequence arising from the apparent triumph of modern "theoretical curiosity"—whose key attributes are those of continuous

accumulation, professionalization, and institutionalization—involves the axiomatic authority and meaningfulness accorded to specialization. Specialization not only implies an accumulative model of inquiry and the abandonment of the classical, *eudaimonistic* understanding of theory; it also favors a conception of knowledge as comprising a potentially infinite number of categorically dissimilar, spatiotemporally distinct facts or events. In its principled rejection of universals and the Aristotelian proposition that knowledge ought to be relevant to its individual practitioners, the modern ethos of knowledge as the open-ended, methodical, disciplinary, and specialized analysis of information necessarily favored a particularism that was to find consummate expression in the so-called new Historicism of the 1980s. And yet, while this methodologically more reflexive Historicism logically disavows the strong penchant for "grand narrative" of nineteenth-century *Historismus* in favor of so many specialized micro-analyses, it ultimately could not achieve what Alan Liu has so shrewdly identified as its recurrent quest for "local transcendence" without underlying and largely unexamined ideological commitments of its own. The implicit framework at issue involves a small number of axioms concerning the projected benefits of an accumulative (not to say transactional) mode of scholarly production, which I shall identify in their most unvarnished form:

1) *The Axiom of the Archive*: that specialized research, understood as the recovery of previously overlooked materials and sources, amounts to a mode of knowledge production whose significance is taken to be self-certifying.
2) *The Axiom of Contextualism*: that the supposedly new materials so recovered largely imply their own causal and argumentative force simply by being (materially, biographically, or idiomatically) associated with a context whose outline is either being presupposed outright or inferred from the interpretive community (re)currently husbanding it.
3) *The Axiom of Pluralism* (or 'indifferentism'): that the power and significance of contemporary critique arises from the primitive accumulation of so many disaggregated voices and archival projects, with the further assumption that critical knowledge will spontaneously arise from the open-market interaction of (presumptively) equivalent/indifferent (*gleichgültig*) perspectives.
4) *The Axiom of Retroactive Liberation* (or 'secularization'): that an institutional, professional, and transactional mode of critique will eventually liberate historical meanings from their alleged

past entrapment in religious or ideological norms and values and, in so doing, will restore for us their temporarily missed, yet always intended authentic (secular) core.[11]

5) *The Axiom of Critique as a Guarantor of Historical Progress*: that the transactionalism of modern, institutional knowledge effects a teleological progression towards a hypostatized Liberal community envisioned as wholly transparent, inclusive, tolerant, and exhaustively informed. Crucially, though, this *telos* can only be articulated in a language of permanent deferral and (in what constitutes a diametrical reversal of Aristotelian thought) is being defined by the *absence* of any specific norms or contents rather than by the practical acknowledgment of their supra-personal authority.[12]

The self-imposed restriction of recent models of inquiry to tightly localized and circumscribed chronotopes (biographically conceived time spans, the *punctum* of this or that local event, dates of publication, etc.) is, of course, a familiar trait of nineteenth-century Historicism and has in equal measure enabled and constrained the project of Romantic Historicism for fully two decades now. Its core-axioms can be traced to Descartes's and Bacon's inauguration of philosophical and scientific modernity, from where they migrated to the political and economic projects of classical Liberalism and their ascetic and value-neutral rhetoric of emancipation, progress, growth, and political rights (*liberté, fraternité, egalité*, etc.). Aside from the axiom already discussed, namely, that knowledge is always concerned with the particular, special case, there is another, equally counter-intuitive premise. It holds what the French Revolutionary calendar had so categorically stipulated: that the self-creation and self-legitimation of modernity pivots on societies instituting a radical caesura vis-à-vis the past and so freeing themselves from what Paine calls the "manuscript assumed authority of the dead."[13]

Carl Schmitt unhesitatingly identifies this "idea of an arbitrary power over history [as] the real revolutionary idea."[14] Defining of modernity—and precisely for that reason not a reliable premise for a critique of modernity—is a self-conscious and provocative rhetoric of which Paine's *Rights of Man* is just one, albeit a particularly strident example: viz., the rhetoric of the sudden check, the caesura (Gr. ποχή). It hardly surprises that the latter term—literally, "a suspension of judgment" originally identified by Sextus Empiricus as an integral component of skepticism (and taken over by Stoic epistemology)—was to prove so

influential for the self-description and self-legitimation of the modern era (Ger. *Neuzeit*). For unlike all preceding history, modernity stakes its claim to the status of an e*poch* on a self-certifying, all-pervading skepticism. "The problem of legitimacy is bound up with the very concept of an epoch itself," Hans Blumenberg notes; for "the modern age was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in so doing, simultaneously created the other epochs" (*LMA* 116). In deriving the positive legitimacy of its own scientific and political theories from its negative outlook on time as something cyclical and recursive, modernity—particularly after Descartes and what, echoing Hegel, Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the "Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice"—gave rise not only to itself as a (putatively) rational and legitimate process but also to the implicit proposition that historical time is divisible into coherent and sharply defined epochs.[15]

The intelligibility of historically situated objects thus came to be premised on specific methodical procedures designed to isolate and freeze them in time. As a fundamentally sociological (and anti-aesthetic or iconoclastic) attempt at decoding any variety of symbolic practice, Historicism regards its commerce with the past as a one-way street leading from an obfuscated and agonistic past to a transparent, secular, if also somewhat purposeless or transactional mode of scholarly exchange, the kind of "eternal conversation" that Carl Schmitt had branded as the deleterious and lasting heritage of Romantic Liberalism.[16] It posits and exemplifies a work ethic and a method of sorts, but it does so without the courage of articulating an end, a purpose, let alone a concept of value. Instead, the first order of modern professionalism is to generate visible (published) tokens of one's industriousness such as will affirm one's institutional credentials and professional persona.[17] Professionalism involves the outward, accumulative commitment to an idea of knowledge whose ultimate end (in the Aristotelian sense of a *causa finalis*) it cannot specify.

The institutional, trans-individual, and accumulative mode of knowledge-production just sketched and so unreflexively implemented within contemporary literary and cultural studies is not, however, without its own intellectual pre-history. For what Hans Blumenberg calls "the process of theoretical curiosity" *unwittingly transposes the ancient cosmological attribute of infinity into the proceduralism of modern knowledge production.* Already vexing to early modern thinkers, such as Pascal and Hobbes, "infinity is more a predicate of indefiniteness than of fulfilling dignity, more an expression of disappointment than of presumption." As modern rationalism (beginning with Nicholas Cusanus) began to

transpose the attribute of "infinity" from the *object* of scholastic inquiry (God) to the *process* of knowledge itself, it risked pervasive discontent on account of "the indefinite character of its course, the lack of distinctive points, intermediate goals, or even final goals."[18] With the concept of number and its infinite expandability (*connexio*) serving as its new "metaphysical archetype," modern knowledge thus had to change its "criterion for the general validity of a proposition: for it to be true, the predicate no longer needed to merge without remainder into its subject; rather, what was now required was a self-evident and universal rule of progress guaranteeing that the difference between subject and predicate be steadily diminishing."[19] At the level of terminology, the most conspicuous new term to express the accumulative, impersonal, and abstract mode of knowledge production is that of "system," which arises to prominence in the later seventeenth century and undergoes further scrutiny and differentiation throughout the eighteenth century.[20] Along with the emergence and eventual dominance of system as the new, concerted mode of intellectual production *par excellence*, we also note the individual's growing alienation from philosophical thinking (in the Classical, *eudaimonistic* sense), specifically its vexing inability to specify any normative objective (in the sense of an Aristotelian *telos*) that is being served by the production of knowledge.

This crucial (if logically flawed) transmogrifying of infinity as a heretofore divine quality into a key attribute of Modernity's conception of knowledge as the institutional accumulation of facts and propositions at once specialized *and* abstract holds another, crucial implication for the field of Romantic Studies. For the paradigm of knowledge production just described implies that any individual instance of cognition may claim only a transitory, occasional, and instrumental role within the process of knowledge itself. The end of the process as such remains forever beyond the purview of any individual. For "questions of ends are questions of values," Alasdair McIntyre notes in his reading of Kant's moral theory, "and on values reason is silent."[21] Within the conception of knowledge that arises in sync with the doctrines of classical Liberalism and eighteenth-century political economy, that is, the value of all that can be known (or, for that matter, is worth knowing) is strictly one of expediency and utility. Yet the problem with such a model of perpetual instrumentality, as McIntyre pointed out so persuasively, is that it subordinates all claims to a purely abstract and formalist standard of utility that inevitably perpetrates a new type of alienation and meaninglessness on modern productive existence. For inasmuch as the utilitarian "appeal to the criteria of pleasure will not

tell me whether to drink or swim and appeal to those of happiness cannot decide for me between the life of a monk and that of a soldier. . . . the notion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number is a notion without a clear content at all" (*AV* 64); or, as Coleridge had put it in *Aids to Reflection*: "the Man makes the *motive,* and not the motive the Man."[22]

In a subtler language that will occupy us again later, Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825) and his posthumous *Opus Maximum* anticipate McIntyre's critique of a strictly instrumentalized notion of rationality and of moral agency. For to posit "virtue as a species of prudence" whose actions "originate in motives supplied by the present state of existence" mires the Utilitarian account in a notion of immediacy that runs counter to its calculating implementation. To draw, in response to this dilemma, a distinction "between Selfishness, or the unconsidered obedience to an immediate appetite or restlessness, and Self-interest, i.e., the extension and modification of the same selfishness by Fore-thought," simply will not do. For Coleridge, "this argument supposes the plenary causative or determining power in these motives or impulses, so that both the one and the other do not at all differ from physical impact as far as the relation of cause and effect is concerned." Clearly, lest it should indeed deserve its eventual label as the "pig-philosophy," Utilitarianism at the very least had to grant that "a motive is neither more nor less than the act of an intelligent being determining itself . . . i.e., the power of an intelligent being to determine its own agency." Hence the Utilitarian's make-shift discrimination between self-interest and selfishness begs the overall question of what prompts our (moral) choices in life; for "we should still have to ask what determined the mind to permit this determining power to these motives and impulses. Or why did the mind or Will sink from its proper superiority to the physical laws of cause and effect, and place itself in the same class with the bullet or the billiard-ball?"[23]

Utilitarianism and Classical Political Liberalism, as well as their twentieth-century disciplinary permutations (e.g., pragmatism, behaviorism, and anti-foundationalism) prove so frustrating and ultimately fail because they categorically refuse to specify an external, normative framework (be it "divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority") within which the modern individual's material and expressive practices could ever acquire significance. Commenting on Modern Liberalism's atrophied notion of community as a merely occasional convergence of intrinsically autistic selves, Alasdair McIntyre notes

how "each moral agent now spoke unconstrained . . . but why should anyone else now listen to him?"[24] Pluralism's dilemma is that it disavows any normative framework within which the individual methodical, specialized, and professional pursuit of knowledge could even potentially attain universal relevance. In the absence of any normative framework and (Aristotelian) *telos*, modernity since Bacon and Descartes has asked the subject to inhabit and cultivate *structures* (of behavior, representation, labor, or moral justification) while refusing on principle to identify their ultimate *function* by making explicit the end relative to which *these* specific structures are indeed the requisite and ethically justified means. For Hannah Arendt, "the much deplored devaluation of all things, that is, the loss of all intrinsic worth, begins with their transformation into values or commodities, for from this moment on they exist only in relation to some other thing which can be acquired in their stead." Hence, "in a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for some further ends. This perplexity . . . can be diagnosed theoretically as an innate incapacity to understand the distinction between utility and meaningfulness, which we express linguistically by distinguishing between 'in order to' and 'for the sake of.'"[25]

The Persistence of Gnosis: *Epoch*, Freedom, and "Error" in Philosophical Modernity

Typically ignoring an important distinction between the *punctum* of the biographical and the long *durée* of human and cosmological time—what Hans Blumenberg distinguishes as *Lebenszeit* and *Weltzeit*—subfields such as Romantic Studies or eighteenth-century studies would do well to ponder Blumenberg's thesis that modernity arose by radically overstating its emancipatory and self-authorizing potential. To entertain that possibility means to consider that many of the conflicts and antagonisms vexing European societies between 1780 and 1830 reenact (however inadvertently) a philosophical dilemma that had haunted Western civilization since the Patristic attempts at consolidating Christianity as a coherent theological system in response to the competing philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism).[26] One of my principal objectives in this essay is to show that Romanticism (notwithstanding its far more parochial explication by the Historicist critique of the last two decades) sought to articulate Modernity as a pervasive and potentially irremediable dilemma. Particularly for a

thinker as capacious and complex as Coleridge, the intellectual's true vocation involves scrutinizing the Enlightenment's self-certifying claims and prognostications. In light of the dramatic revolutionary turn of 1789 and beyond, these claims come to reveal themselves less as the apotheosis or fulfillment of modernity's aspirational rhetoric since the Reformation and the scientific and political revolutions wrought by Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, and Descartes than as the moment when the antagonisms intrinsic to the project of modernity reach a conspicuous and fatal intensity. Doing so required for Coleridge—as indeed it does for us—that one step back from and critically evaluate the self-certifying, liberal-progressive optimism that can be traced back, at the very least, to Descartes' pivotal conceptual bequest to modernity: the idea of skepticism as a *method* of epistemological self-creation. For it was above all *the idea of method* which made possible the emergence and continued, speculative self-transformation, first in Britain and then on the Continent, of a new type of entrepreneurial and ceaselessly mobile, self-transforming, and class-specific subjectivity.

Coleridge's imaginative tabulation of the "costs of modernity," both in his poetry and prose, marks the beginning of a turn, both in philosophy and poetics, away from instrumental and pragmatic models of rationality and towards the (mostly negative) knowledge of history as one all-pervading miscarriage. It is no accident that this shift should have coincided with a rapprochement of philosophy (theology) and poetics in writers like Blake, Coleridge, Hölderlin, Goethe, Schlegel, and Schopenhauer, among others.[27] In one way or another, all of them felt that to inhabit modernity is to be burdened with the Sisyphean task of endless self-description and self-legitimation. Hence, given the impossibility of "grounding" a modern self distinguished by its emancipation from, if not outright repudiation of any normative framework, a different kind of knowledge—best known as "criticism" or "critique"—had to be devised as a supplement for the rapidly fading idea of incontestable principles or first causes. Once the origins of creation were felt to have become inaccessible, creativity had to be reconstituted in the simulacrum of imaginative writing (*poiesis*). Schlegel's arguments regarding the complementarity of criticism and poesy stem from precisely this realization. However different its execution in other respects, critiques of modernity from Blake and Coleridge onward converge in their challenge to the idea of Reason as categorically secular, self-legitimating, and free of historical presuppositions. Their arguments thus conceive of modernity—dating very roughly from the theological, cultural, cosmological, and epistemological

transformations wrought by Luther, Gutenberg, Galileo, Kopernikus, and Descartes—as playing out, however inadvertently, a number of antagonisms that continued to plague Christian theology as it sought to consolidate itself vis-à-vis the competing, post-Aristotelian schools of Skepticism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Gnosticism during the Hellenistic period. As a differentiated critique of Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism and its twentieth-century heirs again confronted the scope and internal antagonisms of early Christian eschatology that, beginning with Descartes, had been contracted into the proceduralism of the modern self and its embrace of progressive method as a surrogate for the enigma of salvation.

As it happens, the modern cogito's apparent (or at least asserted) self-identity and freedom—instantiated as the counter-intuitive ethos of radical doubt or skepticism—once again opens a window on an ontological dilemma that, as Blumenberg notes, had never been conclusively resolved since its initial discovery by the Gnostic philosophers (Valentinus, Marcion, Menander) of the second and third centuries A.D.[28] Long and almost exclusively defined by the heresiological writings of the church fathers opposed to it (Irinaeus of Lyon, Hyppolitus of Rome, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen), Gnosticism involves an extraordinary variety of diverse positions straddling the boundaries—both conceptually and geographically—between the Hellenistic syncretism of the Eastern Mediterranean and the apostolic model of Christianity of the West. What for Irinaeus resembled a "many-headed hydra" (*Adversos Haereses* [*Against Heresies*] I, 30, 15), was above all understood by its main proponents as a religion whose members sought "knowledge" (γνῶσις) by esoteric and often multifarious interpretive means. As the Coptic writings in the so called Nag Hammadi Library make clear, the Gnostics' eponymous stress on "knowledge" (as opposed to mere faith) was central to their overall undertaking, namely, to ponder as far as possible the manifest estrangement of nature and matter from the "spirit" (πνεῦμα) posited by early Christianity. Far from a self-conscious heresy, that is, "Gnosis . . . understood itself as a correct interpretation of Christianity" by countering the proposed absolutism of a model of faith that "knows nothing concerning itself and remains attached to what is immediately in the foreground" (Rudolph 51–52). To be sure, Clement of Alexandria (~ 140–211 A.D.) and Origen († 253 A.D.) had still sought to reconcile the widening breach between a faith exclusively anchored in Christ and the apostles, on the one hand, and the Gnostics' more wide-ranging and esoteric speculations on the other. Ultimately, though,

the powerful label of heresy, firmly in place by the third century A.D., precluded any doctrinal consensus and, in fact, caused the Gnostics' writings to be largely expunged.

Gnosticism's central and most familiar trait involves its dualist cosmogony according to which "the world is the product of a divine tragedy, a disharmony in the realm of God, a baleful destiny in which man is entangled and from which he must be set free."[29] In his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg seizes on the Gnostic critique of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic cosmology, a critique that focuses on "where, in the process of the world's formation, rational planning and blind necessity, archetype and matter collide" (127). In radicalizing the neo-Platonist demonization of matter (see epigraph), one early Gnostic, Marcion of Sinope (excommunicated in Rome in 144 A.D.), sought to circumvent the apparent tension between spirit (*pneuma*) and matter (*physis*) by disaggregating god the creator from god the redeemer.[30] For Marcion, "a theology that declares its God to be the omnipotent creator of the world and bases its trust in this God on the omnipotence thus exhibited cannot at the same time make the destruction of this world and the salvation of men from the world into the central activity of this God" (Blumenberg 129). John Milbank thus views Gnosticism as "an ontological rather than a (pre)historical fall" defined by the "idea of primal disaster within the divine *pleroma*" that requires "the salvation of God himself from his involvement in temporality."[31] By instituting a sharp divide between creator and redeemer, Marcion effectively made the destruction of the material cosmos a requisite outcome, a position that continued to resonate in Christianity's recurrent attraction to chiliastic and millenarian movements, as well as in Romantic apocalypticism, such as we find it articulated in Blake's prophetic books (especially *The (first) Book of Urizen* and *Jerusalem*), Malthus's *Essay,* Byron's "Darkness," and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man.*

Yet aside from its cosmological implications, the dualism at the heart of Gnostic thought also affects modernity's conception of the individual subject as defined, above all, by its freedom. Schelling's 1809 *Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* thus contends that, "in maintaining freedom, a power which by its nature is unconditioned is asserted to exist alongside of and outside the divine power." A sharp tension thus opens up between modern rationalism's core axiom—the notion of free, self-conscious human agents—and the Judaeo-Christian notion of an omnipotent god.[32] Wordsworth's *Prelude* acknowledges the same basic paradox when framing the emergence of its author-protagonist

as that of "A Captive . . . coming from a house / Of bondage, from yon City's walls set free" (1805, I: 6–7). In a telling reversal, the passage posits freedom as achievable only by escaping the very world of urban commerce in which most contemporaries would ordinarily have sought to realize it.[33] Moreover, in suffusing this opening claim with numerous biblical allusions (here to Exodus 13:14), Wordsworth hints that freedom can be purchased only at the expense of implicitly rejecting the idea of an omnipotent God and, in so doing, unleashing an enduring and pervasive metaphysical crisis. That this crisis should often have gone unnoticed, even (perhaps especially) in contemporary literary and cultural studies, is the result of a twofold failure of historical memory. First, the paradox of human freedom challenges the notion of an omnipotent god (or rather, exposes a fundamental dichotomy within our conception of such a god); the problem of freedom thus reveals the dormant philosophical dilemma of ancient Gnosticism as it resurfaces in ever more virulent ways in European modernity since the Reformation. For Blumenberg, modernity ought to be approached as "the second overcoming of Gnosticism, . . . [an] old enemy who did not come from without but was ensconced at Christianity's very roots" (*LMA* 126).

Second, our current models of disciplinary and institutional knowledge have implicitly embraced modernity's definition of the *vita activa* as "production," which in turn rests on a wholly instrumentalized, means-end concept of rationality and thus understands all products, including those of intellectual labor (knowledge) as exchangeable commodities. A principal catalyst for the emergence of modern professionalism, this reconceptualization of knowledge as a commodity to be produced and exchanged is largely the result of the abandonment of Humboldt's and Newman's idea of a university dedicated to the cultivation of *Humanität* in favor of increasingly fluid institutional settings inhabited by nomadic professionals forever manufacturing and disseminating a new type of commodity known as "information." To see why this paradigm shift bodes ill for the humanities in particular, we may begin by recalling Hannah Arendt's observation that the concept of "production" "is entirely absorbed in and exhausted by the end product" and thus misses an essential feature of human practice, namely, that as "action . . . it is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply" (*HC* 233).

To conceive of knowledge strictly as a product and commodity (i.e., as information) is to embrace its marketability as the principal,

if not exclusive indicator of its truth-value. What has vanished from knowledge is nothing less than History—both in the sense of humanistic knowledge as something anchored in vast and often labyrinthine genealogies of inquiry, yet also in the more personal sense of its often miraculous etiology, be it as Platonic wonder, Stoic contemplation, or something on the order of Keatsian "negative capability." Perhaps most troubling, the contraction of knowledge to information also severs all connection between knowing as a gestational process and the ancient hyper-good of "happiness" (*eudaimonia*)—experiences effectively vanquished by the desired convertibility of information into currency (monetary, professional, or otherwise). Simply put, only knowledge can be an end, whereas information by its very nature will always remain a means. Meanwhile, it is just this progressive erosion of the ancient conception of knowledge that we can trace in the symptomatically anxious psychology of modern literary narratives from the Romantic period forward. Leaving aside Coleridge's mariner (to whom we'll turn momentarily), there are the troubled exploits of the young Wordsworth in Book One of the *Prelude*, as well as the irresistible and fatal acts of curiosity of Caleb Williams or the materialist hubris of Victor Frankenstein in Godwin's and Mary Shelley's eponymous narratives. All these narratives anticipate Arendt's central contention, namely, that "the human capacity for freedom, by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done. Nowhere . . . does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man" (*HC* 233–34).

As illustrated by the sundry crimes and misdemeanors of Wordsworth's child-protagonist throughout Book I of the *Prelude*, modern freedom originates not in a rational or providentially guided self; rather, it stages the wholly extra-moral and -rational drama of sheer volition. Reluctantly, Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825) concede that, as Schelling had put it, "only out of the darkness of unreason (out of feeling, out of longing, the sublime mother of understanding) grow clear thoughts" (*OHF* 35). In Coleridge's searching formulation, "it *is* in our power to disclaim our Nature as *Moral* Beings. It is possible (barely possible, I admit) that a man may have remained ignorant or unconscious of the Moral Law within him: and a man need only persist in disobeying the Law of Conscience to *make* it possible for himself to deny its existence, . . . Were it otherwise, the Creed would

stand in the same relation to Morality as the Multiplication Table" (*AR* 136). Precisely this elemental possibility that any individual may categorically recuse him- or herself from any spiritual covenant, social embeddedness, and hence repudiate all spiritual and social obligations now defines freedom (and hence our Modernity predicated on it) as inherently pre-rational.[34] As Hans Blumenberg puts it in his discussion of Descartes, "man is not free in that he has grounds for his action but rather in that he can dispense with grounds" (*LMA* 185). The Romantics' preferred name for that primal rejection of any ground or reason by an agent is the 'will.'

"In the final and highest instance there is no other Being than Will," Schelling remarks even before Schopenhauer was to develop the implications of this thesis to its fullest extent; this "Will is primordial Being [*Urseyn*], and all predicates apply to it alone—groundlessness, eternity, independence of time, self-affirmation." Inasmuch as freedom *qua* unadulterated volition subsists between the "possibility of good and evil," the premise of a free agent revives an ancient philosophical dilemma: "either real evil is admitted, in which case it is unavoidable to include evil itself in infinite substance or in the Primal Will [*Urwillen*], and thus totally disrupt the conception of an all-perfect Being; or the reality of evil must in some way or other be denied, in which case the real conception of freedom disappears at the same time."[35] Coleridge's and Schelling's critiques of modernity's attempt at thinking God as "a mere moral world-order" (*OHF* 30) and as the *actus purissimus* of absolute auto-genesis rests on the belief that such a view effectively perpetuates neo-Platonism's demonization of matter as the lapsed progeny that has betrayed the "primal ground" or "depth" (βῦθός)—also known as the "pre-beginning" or "aeon" of Valentinian Gnosis or the "eternals" of Blake's *Book of Urizen*.[36] The self-authorizing rationalism that permeates "the whole of modern European philosophy since its inception (through Descartes)" thus originates, in Schelling's view, in a principled abhorrence of matter, a position that not only accounts for the impoverished view of nature but, in an often overlooked consequence, also deprives God or reason of its proper "ground." Schelling's text lets us glimpse at the outlines of a metaphysical problem—most forcefully articulated by Gnostic philosophy—that had long been buried beneath the sands of historical time and whose unresolved and persistent energy constitutes a principal catalyst behind the philosophical and aesthetic projects of modernity, in particular those of Romanticism.

Arguably one of the most compelling manifestations of Gnosticism in the Romantic period, Blake's *Book of Urizen*, thus conjures up a creator god ("a shadow of horror") anxious to vanquish the "abominable void / This soul-shudd'ring vacuum" that had preceded creation. Seething "in silent activity: / Unseen in tormenting passions," Blake's Urizen dramatizes the primordial act of creation as wholly non- or pre-rational, as the auto-genesis of rationality out of sheer volition and compulsion: "an activity unknown and horrible; / A self-contemplating shadow." In Blake's agonistic un-writing of the Book of Genesis, Urizen creates matter, form, structure, and order and, in so doing, delimits (Urizen = horizon) and ultimately betrays the cosmological attribute of infinity itself. Hence the finitude of the produced world and the bodies that fill it invariably betrays the infinity or raw potentiality that slumbers within the creative act itself: "Sund'ring, dark'ning, thund'ring! / Rent away with terrible crash / Eternity roll'd wide apart / . . . / Departing: departing: departing: / Leaving ruinous fragments of life."[37] The creative transmutation of matter into form amounts to a "primeval [Blake's pun on *prime evil*]" betrayal of eternity by a determinate, embodied form. Urizen's compulsive form-giving betrays eternity for the determinacy of one and only one history, thus sacrificing all potential worlds for this actual one. Hence, if redemption involves less the salvation of actual existence than the recovery of those potentialities negated on behalf of a singular reality, it will pivot on the counter-factual work of the imagination and art. It will demand something like the conspiratorial, at times even paranoid aesthetic of the Blakean "contrary," which disarticulates the mechanistic and causal stranglehold of empirical history, uniform, homogeneous time, and linear narrative. Noting how "Poetry and criticism after Milton in our language are attempts to *see*, in frequent contradistinction to the main Protestant tradition of listening to the Word," Harold Bloom conjecturally interprets such visionary aspiration as a "mark of Gnosis, [viz.] that seeing is the peculiar attribute of certain spiritualized intellectuals."[38] Though he probably never read Blake, Carl Schmitt succinctly captures Blake's Gnostic vision, particularly its dystopic outlook on the Real, when defining Romanticism overall as instituting a categorical reversal between reality and possibility, such that

> it is not possibility that is empty, but rather reality. . . . [In] representing possibility as the higher category, . . . the romantics . . . preferred the state of eternal becoming and possibilities that are never consummated to the

> confines of a concrete reality. This is because only one of the numerous possibilities is ever realized. In the moment of realization, all of the other infinite possibilities are precluded. A world is destroyed for a narrow-minded reality. The "fullness of the idea" is sacrificed to a wretched specificity. In consequence, every spoken word is already a falsehood. (66)

The Gnostic origins of such a position are quite evident, as is Blake's consequent embrace of "an aesthetic that is neither mimetic, like Greek aesthetic from Plato to Plotinus, nor anti-mimetic, like Hebraism from the Bible to Jacques Derrida." For Blake no less than Schmitt, Gnostic knowledge involves a vision that neither appropriates nor indeed learns from what it beholds. "A Gnostic never learns anything, because learning is a process in *time*," Bloom notes, and "if we were to ask 'What does failed Gnosticism become?' we would have to answer that Gnosticism never fails . . . [because] a vision whose fulfillment, by definition, must be always *beyond* the cosmos, cannot in its own terms be said to fail *within* our cosmos."[39]

By contrast, a thinker like Hegel is not prepared to follow through on what are, in fact, strong Gnostic elements in his philosophy. Thus, while characterizing Nature as "self-alienated spirit [*der sich entfremdete Geist*]" or as "the negative of the Idea," Hegel's entire speculative method claims that dialectical thinking may progressively emancipate itself (and so redeem us) from the otherworldliness of that dualist conception.[40] Though unconcerned with the Gnostic legacy, Adorno and Horkheimer clearly follow in Hegel's footsteps when interpreting the Enlightenment as a progressive overcoming of the primordial deficiency that Modernity has always imputed to nature *as origin*: "The world becomes chaos, and synthesis [its] salvation" (*DE* 5). Consequently, as Blumenberg observes, already the Gnostics posited that the redeeming god had not only "the right to destroy a cosmos that he did not create" but was in fact obligated to do so. For as a corrective to the betrayal of the infinite potentiality of the idea by a mundane and singular reality, apocalyptic deliverance implies the restitution of eternity over and against the *interregnum* of historical time and brings about "primarily man's enlightenment regarding his fundamental and impenetrable *deception by the cosmos*" (*LMA* 129–30; italics mine).

This last remark also flags the Gnostic origins of that quintessential modern (Cartesian) preoccupation with error and deception.[41] Thus, as Hannah Arendt argued nearly half a century ago, Descartes's writings are haunted by two "nightmares": first, the possibility that, in the wake of an all-pervading, self-conscious doubt, all of reality will prove but an elaborate dream. Second, once the senses were being experienced

not just as unreliable but also as the veritable embodiment of error and deception, it appeared that "an evil spirit, a *Dieu trompeur*, willfully and spitefully betrays man [rather] than that God is the ruler of the universe." The pivotal loss associated with modernity and rationalism, then, was "not the capacity for truth or faith . . . but the certainty that formerly went with it" (*HC* 277). This Cartesian predicament—i.e., of the experience of error and the inference that the cosmos had been created in such a way as to allow for the persistence of error—was only being felt so acutely because the world had, in fact, *not* come to an end in the way that Marcion's Gnostic vision had implied. As Blumenberg puts it,

> The fact that the expected *parousia* did not occur must have been full of consequences for the transformation of the original teachings. . . . The world, which turned out to be more persistent than expected, attracted once again the old questions regarding its origin and its dependability and demanded a decision between trust and mistrust, an arrangement of life with the world rather than against it. It is easy to see that the eventual decision against Gnosticism was due not to the inner superiority of the dogmatic system of the Church but to the intolerability of the consciousness that this world is supposed to be the prison of the evil god and is nevertheless not destroyed by the power of the god who, according to his revelation, is determined to deliver mankind. The original eschatological pathos directed against the *existence* of the world was transformed into a new interest in the *condition* of the world. (*LMA* 131)

While St. Augustine had sought to resolve the suspension of certainty concerning the *eschaton* or *telos* of the cosmos and its inhabitants by devising a sophisticated theory of human freedom, the compensatory doctrinal efforts of the Patristic and Scholastic philosophers who succeeded him ultimately fail, at least in Blumenberg's interpretation, on a variety of grounds that need not concern us here. What does matter, however, is that the paradox of freedom—to which, by way of Hannah Arendt, I had alluded before—or what Blumenberg calls the "senselessness of self-assertion was the heritage of the Gnosticism which was not overcome but only 'translated'" (*LMA* 136). For if modernity constitutes itself by once again confronting the challenge of Gnosticism, it now does so under the "aggravated circumstances" of an unsuccessful Scholastic solution that had "lost its human relevance precisely on account of the absolutism of . . . divine grace, that is, on account of the dependence of the individual's salvation on a faith that he can no longer choose to have." As early modern science and philosophy respond to the "disappearance of order" by "no longer

perceiv[ing] in given states of affairs the binding character of the ancient and medieval cosmos" but, instead, "hold[ing] them to be, in principle, at man's disposal," the burden of legitimation has fundamentally shifted. For it now involves "responsibility for the condition of the world as a challenge relating to the future, not as an original offense in the past."[42]

Arguably, the most seminal consequence to flow from this crucial reversal in how the self achieves stability and legitimacy vis-à-vis its "world" is the rise of Classical Liberalism as the dominant political theory of post-1750 European societies and, concurrently, the emergence of a fundamentally new strategy of self-description, namely, the model of narrative as an organic, self-generating and self-regulating developmental structure. No longer a mere reflex or transcript of the *vita contemplativa*, modern narrative becomes a textual or virtual correlate of Blumenberg's "process of theoretical curiosity," a self-originating and continually self-revising developmental trajectory that, beginning with Bruno, Kopernikus, and Descartes, establishes itself as the methodological blueprint for all human intelligence. With its uniquely reflexive model of literariness and writing as a figural (rather than referential) positing of social and historical reality—so evident in the hermeneutic self-consciousness of Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, F. Schlegel, Novalis, Jean Paul, Schleiermacher, von Kleist, Shelley, Keats, or Stendhal—Romanticism significantly complicates our understanding of Cartesianism's epistemological implications for a human intelligence now understood to exist only *qua* textual mediation. Modernity's reconceptualization of the cosmos as a self-regulating and open-ended dialectical process rests on a number of complex and richly intercalated conceptual traits. The formal shift from epic to novel, so lucidly analyzed in Lukacs's 1914 *Theory of the Novel* and in Walter Benjamin's 1936 "The Storyteller," arises from modernity's fundamental estrangement from all cosmological premises and its consequent loss of any ethical framework such as Western thought from Aristotle to Aquinas had variously derived it from the idea of a cosmos made up of timeless, dynamic forms or essences. Whereas epic telling draws on knowledge that is forever bound up with the experience and acknowledgment of things past (one's ancestry, past debts and crimes, as well as wisdom alternately received or acquired as the hero responds to the claims, counsels, and memories of previous generations), modern narrative no longer derives its legitimacy from an appeal to antecedent realities and memories but from its own discontinuous and performative imaginings of an as yet unrealized future.[43]

Likewise, modern political economy repositions the metaphysical category of *providentia* by positing a fundamental convergence (Smith's "invisible hand") between the vicarious purposiveness of compound human interests and "the wisdom of God." Analogously, modern narrative, even as it also vitiates the possibility of formal closure—a source of continual perplexity—is sustained and (hypothetically) legitimated by its open-ended acquisition, authentication, and redistribution of an entirely new commodity: information. Inasmuch as narrative strives to ascertain the intellectual adaptivity and autonomy of its subject—which is to say, protagonist *and* reader—closure in the form of a redemptive ending will necessarily prove counter-intuitive, indeed counter-productive. Instead, the category of "error" now acquires pivotal significance as the principal catalyst of a human intelligence that is continually unfolding. For "the final overcoming of the Gnostic inheritance cannot *restore* the cosmos because the function of the idea of the cosmos is reassurance about the world and in the world, because it has as its correlate the theoretical ideal and the theoretical leisure that had been associated with the idea of the cosmos from the time of the Greeks. The world cannot be made 'good' in itself once more by a mere change of sign *because it would then cease to be man's irritation and provocation*" (*LMA* 140; italics mine). At the level of political economy, this position will manifest itself in the anti-interventionist rhetoric of classical Liberalism, such as James Steuart's and Malthus's contention that the Catholic emphasis on charity fails to preserve an element of need among the working poor and so deprives them of a stimulus of "continuous, organized discipline" (Milbank 31). Designed forever to uproot error *and* at the same time premised on the continued, productive harnessing of further error, social process and modern narrative alike prove inherently dialectical, even (perhaps especially) where they do not understand themselves to be so.

For post-Cartesian modernity, error is the blood sustaining its circulatory system of meaning, even as such meaning is achieved only via our continual anticipation or projection of future states yet to be realized. Asked to tell his story, which by Book Seven is well advanced, Goethe's Wilhelm Meister characteristically falters: "Unfortunately, I have nothing to relate except one error [*Irrtümer*] after another, one false step after the other" (273). And yet, unfailingly mindful of its own exemplarity, Goethe's narrative soon qualifies its protagonist's premature dismissal of error as mere *ephemeron* or a past that should never have taken place. Thus it falls to the magisterial voice of the Abbé to instruct Whilhelm on his erroneously dismissive understanding

of error, which the Abbé values as the indispensable catalyst of progress: "the duty of a teacher is not to preserve man from error but to guide him in error, in fact, to let him drink it in, in full draughts. For the man who only sips at error, can make do with it for quite a time, delighting in it as a rare pleasure, whereas a man who drinks it to the dregs, must recognize the error of his ways."[44] Strikingly similar conceptions inform much of Romantic narrative, such as the dialectically self-correcting *récit* of *The Prelude*, or the Blakean project of the illuminated book as the hybridization of visual and textual cues whose strategic interference compels readers to jettison old, dualist models of understanding in favor of a logic of "contraries."

Likewise, Hegel's *Phenomenology* remarks already in its "Introduction" that it is precisely "the fear of falling into error sets up a mistrust of Science, which in the absence of such scruples gets on with the work itself and actually cognizes something; . . . should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is not just the error itself."[45] What Hegel's *Phenomenology* was to radicalize, namely, by showing up the limitations of the Enlightenment's hubris of self-possession at the very instant of critiquing tradition, is the elemental, volitional act of distrust in a cosmos whose benevolent and providential order, prior to the sixteenth century, had been thought as a fact both independent of and indifferent to human intervention. Once again, the Gnostic underpinnings of modernity come into view, for at the very least, as Blumenberg remarks, "the experience of my own error . . . at least excludes the interpretation of the postulate of divine benevolence, which had assumed it to be His will that I should *never* be deceived." This conception of error as quite possibly the only constant underlying all of human experience has far-reaching moral and epistemological implications. For it appears that if "God, without the cooperation and consent of the subject, can directly produce the latter's acts of perception and thus bring about error without any lapse on the part of the knowledge seeker, then He could also produce morally reprehensible actions, such as hate for one's neighbour and even for God, directly and without the supposed agent being responsible."[46] As we are about to see, it is precisely this cosmological perplexity arising from the fact of man's volitional and pre-rational freedom that Coleridge's *Rime* captures in all its fatal material and imaginary entailments.

At the level of epistemology, meanwhile, the same "continued experience of error as a fundamental human condition either leads to the hypothesis of god as a *genius malignus* or to the self-conscious Enlightenment project of a radically new beginning, a supersession

of divine creation by human self-invention" (Blumenberg 186; trans. modified). Critiquing both the Enlightenment and its Hegelian apotheosis, Schopenhauer in 1818 remarks on how "discursive concepts of reason," because of their merely relational and secondary status, are uniquely prone to error: "Perception by itself is enough; therefore what has sprung purely from it and has remained true to it, like the genuine work of art, can never be false, nor can it be refuted through any passing of time, for it gives us not opinion, but the thing itself. With abstract knowledge, with the faculty of reason, doubt and error have appeared in the theoretical, care and remorse in the practical. If in the representation of perception *illusion* does at moments distort reality, then in the representation of the abstract *error* can reign for thousands of years, impose its iron yoke on whole nations. . . ."[47] In emphasizing the sheer persistence ("for thousands of years") of doubt and error as the principal attributes of modernity's concept of self-legitimating and self-revising rational agency, Schopenhauer's epistemological pessimism draws our attention to the modern subject's irremediably atrophied teleological and epistemological foundations. While Blumenberg may be right to note how "the exigency of self-assertion became the sovereignty of self-foundation" and how Cartesian rationalism instantiates a "freedom that does not *submit to* the conditions under which reason has to prove itself radically but *poses* them for itself" (*LMA* 184), the freedom so asserted comes at the monstrous expense of a truly interminable progression bound to eventually exhaust its subjects because of the sheer magnitude *and* the terminal uncertainty of the cognitive effort involved. The fundamental distinction in play here is that between biographical and cosmological time—that is, between *Lebens-* or *Jetztzeit* and *Weltzeit*, respectively. Unfolding on the "non-ground" of a categorically open-ended and hence indeterminate concept of "action," modern subjectivity thus could realize the "enormous enlargement of human capabilities" only at the expense of processes "whose outcome is unpredictable, so that uncertainty rather than frailty becomes the decisive character of human affairs" (*HC* 232).

Modernity and the Shipwreck of the *Vita Activa*: Skeptical Self-Creation in Coleridge

If the protagonist of McEwan's *Amsterdam* inadvertently revives the Gnostic vision of history as an all-encompassing miscarriage and of modern society having transposed the neo-Platonic concept of infinity

into the material world of unfettered production and mindless consumption, the psychological implications of this development emerge with exemplary force in the quintessential anti-modern Gnostic philosopher, Schopenhauer. Working with what became a key trope of Gnosis in modern times—that of a man's perilous nautical venture into the unknown—the following passage (whose fame was further enhanced by Nietzsche's decision to quote it in full in the *Birth of Tragedy*) powerfully conjures up the intrinsically "anxious" psyche of the modern individual. Throughout its entire uncertain existence, the latter must cope with the anxious intuition that the institutional, professional, and conceptual architecture of modernity amounts but to a desperate and precarious makeshift solution aimed at stabilizing and legitimating a state of affairs permanently devoid of metaphysical guarantees. Skillfully enjambing infinity and anxiety as the joint epistemological and affective dimensions of modern existence, the passage ultimately refuses to answer the question also faced by Coleridge's Mariner: namely, whether the terror of infinity or that of apocalypse is ultimately worse:

> Just as the boatman sits in his small boat, trusting his frail craft in a stormy sea that is boundless in every direction, rising and falling with the howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world of full of suffering and misery the individual man calmly sits, supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis*, or the way in which the individual knows things as phenomenon. The boundless world, everywhere full of suffering in the infinite past, in the infinite future, is strange to him, is indeed a fiction. His vanishing person, his extensionless present, his momentary gratification, these alone have reality for him; and he does everything to maintain them, so long as his eyes are not opened by a better knowledge. Till then, there lives only in the innermost depths of his consciousness the wholly obscure presentiment that all this is indeed not really so strange to him, but has a connexion with him from which the *principium individuationis* cannot protect him. From this presentiment arises that ineradicable *dread*, common to all human beings (and possibly even to the more intelligent animals), which suddenly seizes them, when by any chance they become puzzled over the *principium individuationis*, in that the principle of sufficient reason in one or other of its forms seems to undergo an exception. For example, when it appears that some change has occurred without a cause, or a deceased person exists again; or when in any other way the past or the future is present, or the distant is near. The fearful terror at anything of this kind is based on the fact that they suddenly become puzzled over the forms of knowledge of the phenomenon which alone hold their own individuality separate from the rest of the world.[48]

Few texts of the Romantic period develop the troubling implications of modernity's volitional subject, of human freedom, and of the troubling infinity of knowledge as an inferential, error-based process—and in so doing reoccupy the metaphysical problem articulated by Gnosticism—more acutely than Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Both a key-statement for its period and a parable about the philosophical predicament of modernity, the poem powerfully throws into relief the ontological indeterminacy of the modern, self-activating, and self-realizing individual. Built around one of the most enduring and ambivalent tropes in Western metaphysical writing—that of the voyage or, more accurately, shipwreck—Coleridge's poem centers on a single, wholly inexplicable instance of pure, unadulterated individual volition.[49] The Mariner's killing of the albatross, I contend, furnishes us with a parable for the *hubris* that is modernity, specifically its founding, purely volitional act whereby the solitary individual turns the cosmos into an object for (inherently skeptical) experimentation. To do so is to jeopardize the twin theological axioms of a prestabilized cosmos and of mankind's eventual salvation, for both can only ever be guaranteed by the recurrent rhythms of past experience and, through the Mariner's singular act of skepticism/killing, are now sacrificed to a radically new, speculative type of curiosity no longer governed by inherited norms but permanently and anxiously cathected onto future outcomes.

However startling it may be, the Mariner's killing of the albatross, far from gratuitously disrupting an otherwise orderly progression, stands as synecdoche for the scientific and commercial exploits that modernity so often captures in the master-trope of seafaring and shipwreck. In his study of the recurrent trope of shipwreck in Western writing, Hans Blumenberg takes note of "the ancient suspicion that underlies the metaphorics of shipwreck: that there is a frivolous, if not blasphemous, moment inherent in all human seafaring, on a par with an offense against the invulnerability of the earth, the law of *terra inviolata*, which seemed to forbid cutting through isthmuses or building artificial harbors" (10–11); for Blumenberg,

> [two] assumptions above all determine the burden of meaning carried by the metaphorics of seafaring and shipwreck: first, the sea as a naturally given boundary of the realm of human activities and, second, its demonization as the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless, in which it is difficult to find one's bearings. In Christian iconography as well, the sea is the place where evil appears, sometimes with the Gnostic touch that stands for all-devouring Matter that takes everything back into itself. It is part of the

> Johannine Apocalypse's promise that, in the messianic fulfillment, there will no longer be a sea (*he thalassa ouk esti etí*). In the purest form, odysseys are an expression of the arbitrariness of the powers that denied Odysseus a homecoming, senselessly driving him about and finally leading him to shipwreck, in which the reliability of the cosmos becomes questionable and its opposite valuation in Gnosticism is anticipated. (1997, 8)

Earlier readers of Coleridge's *Rime* had often mistakenly assumed that, prior to the killing of the albatross, the crew's nautical exploits were innocent or, in any event, unobjectionable. Yet already in the "Argument" prefaced to the poem's original, 1798 version, Coleridge ominously conjures up the transgressive nature of the nautical venture as such by glossing "How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole."[50] At the risk of running afoul of narrowly historicist protocol, which would hold us to the Unitarian context in which, allegedly, Coleridge was still working out his ideas in 1797–98, there is ample reason to read Coleridge's archaic and cryptic locutions (so strongly reminiscent of what Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* [Lat. 1753/Eng. 1787] had analyzed as the "parabolic style") as a parable of a metaphysical dilemma that was to preoccupy him ever more in his later prose, particularly in *Aids to Reflection* and in his posthumous *Opus Maximum*, texts to which I will return shortly.[51]

Before doing so, however, a methodological and interpretive clarification appears in order. In disputing the innocence of the Mariner's journey prior to his killing of the albatross, I do not mean to align my reading with the narrowly contextualist readings of the *Rime* as a meditation (in prosodic form) on the slave trade, colonial disease, and the moral turpitude of British consumer culture with its seemingly insatiable demand for Rum, Sugar, Cotton, and Mahogany.[52] To be sure, Coleridge himself had regularly participated in that debate, both in the years prior to his writing the *Rime* and during the early 1800s.[53] Thus even a cursory review of his statements on the slavery and colonialism debates will show that colonial disease (especially yellow fever) and the practice of slavery furnish a number of metaphoric and symbolic devices used throughout the *Rime*—"parched" throats, "cold sweat," a crew of fully two-hundred men (typical only for slave ships), etc. Yet to assume on the basis of these intertexts that in his *Rime* Coleridge simply had "set fever to poetry" (Lee 49) is to succumb to one of Historicism's more basic (albeit persistent) interpretive fallacies: viz., that of collapsing figurative into proper meaning by assuming that the field of reference *from* which an expression (allegedly) derives

its figurative character was therefore also the *sole intended topic* of the literary (symbolic) expression now at issue. Lee briefly acknowledges the volatility and complexity of Coleridge's tropes when noting how, "by marrying the tropes of fever and slavery" the *Rime* "also explores slippages between the walled-off categories of self and otherness," such as when, "in the heat of the poem's fever, the mariner *is identified* with Englishmen *and* slaves" (53; first italics mine). Once again, though, the use of "tropes" for Lee (herein quite representative of historicism's nominalist tendencies) is limited to the binarism of two stable, competing, and equally particular *references*. What remains, then, is the sheer assumption that all symbolization is but a referential operation in disguise. As a result, the deep inter-implication of spirituality and rhetoric, one of Coleridge's most abiding and intense preoccupations that would eventually prompt his famous definition of literature as symbolic action ("translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal" [*LS* 30]), is here pared down to the sociological practice of reading as the accumulation of so many cross-references and decodings. Unable to grasp what, for Coleridge, is the very essence of creative, symbolic action—namely, its capacity "to enunciate the whole"—Romantic Historicism's doggedly referential approach to literature begs its question on a grand scale, namely, by continually positing the symbolic as but a covert *re*petition or *re*presentation of an already established and familiar field of reference.[54]

Such an assumption, if granted, threatens to dissolve reading into the mere default value of archival industriousness and its explanatory regress to antecedent meanings and contexts of ever-increasing particularity and, eventually, outright irrelevance to the present. Inasmuch as Historicism remains axiomatically pledged to a conception of *meaning as reference*—viz. as strictly *re*stating or *re*ferring to antecedent (putatively hidden) meaning—its methodological confidence and intellectual poverty are two sides of the same coin. Effectively incapable of grasping meaning as an *emergent* property, historicism instead construes Romanticism's key concepts—originality, novelty, imagination or what Coleridge calls "creative words"—merely as so many elaborate, if unwitting, obfuscations of "the real."[55] Without specifically flagging Historicism, Adorno and Horkheimer seize on precisely this postulate of "the identity of everything with everything else" as the moment where Modernity's preemptive commitment to method as salvation loops back into the mythical indifference that the Enlightenment in particular had purported to overcome:

> The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself. That arid wisdom that holds there is nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played, and all the great thoughts have already been thought, . . . merely reproduces the fantastic wisdom that it supposedly rejects: the sanction of fate that in retribution relentlessly remakes what has already been. What was different is equalized. That is the verdict which critically determines the limits of possible experience [as] . . . universal mediation, the relation of any one existent to any other. (*DE* 12)

Yet even if we set aside Historicism's unwitting implication in (and reproduction of) the methodological and theoretical paradoxes intrinsic to Modernity, Coleridge's own writings strongly militate against any collapsing of symbol into allegory and of reading into cross-referencing. First and foremost, as the consternation of its first readers makes clear, Coleridge's *Rime* quite evidently stands well apart from the established tropes and expressive conventions of anti-Slavery poetry that had emerged as a popular, if often sentimentalizing, genre of middle-class moral edification during the 1790s and early 1800s. Within the *Rime*—whose tone so obviously and strikingly differs from Coleridge's conventional protest poetry (e.g., his 1794 Sonnets "To Kosciusko," "To the Hon Mr. Erskine," "To Burke," etc.; "Domestic Peace," "The Destiny of Nations," "Fears in Solitude" etc.)—the slave trade, yellow fever, and the ultimately moral isolationism (represented by the wedding guest) of late-eighteenth-century British consumer culture operate as *figures* or *symptoms* of modernity's all-pervading, systemic conversion of all matter *and* of human life into means and consequently of abandoning the originally Aristotelian conception of life as *entelecheia*, a position Kant had so famously reargued in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).[56] Even in his early "Lecture on the Slave-Trade" (1795), Coleridge does not simply follow the prevailing line of argument in anti-slavery pamphleteering by indicting the systemic cruelty of the slave trade and exposing the crudely self-serving economic and racial arguments invoked by its apologists. Rather, after opening with a quintessentially metaphysical, Gnostic question "Whence arise our Miseries? Whence arise our Vices?," Coleridge proceeds to argue that a purely Epicurean vision of life as unbridled and interminable consumerism ("to find Happiness in the complete gratification of our bodily wants") effectively betrays the ontological purpose with which all human life has been invested by its Creator: namely, "to busy itself in the acquisition of intellectual aliment" and

"to develope the powers of the Creator."[57] This early passage already anticipates Coleridge's eventual, repeated figural reading of slavery as a glaring symptom of Modernity's wholesale submission to a means/end rationality, a paradigm bound to enslave those ostensibly free in a state of rabid consumerism, intellectual servitude, and spiritual abjection no less alarming than the material depredations visited on indigenous peoples in Africa, the West Indies, and other parts of the globe subjected to the British Colonial enterprise. In other words, slavery for Coleridge is not simply, nor even primarily, an injustice perpetrated within the contingent world of politics and the law; it is no mere violation of a people's or individual's rights. Rather, slavery is fundamentally sin inasmuch as it negates the ontological status of the human as a being imbued with, and hence in life-long obligation to, an immanent *telos*:

> The Contra-distinction of PERSON from THING being the Ground and Condition of all Morality, a system like this of Hobbes's, which begins by confounding them, needs no confutation to a moral Being. A Slave is a *Person* perverted into a *Thing*: Slavery, therefore, is not so properly a deviation from Justice, as an absolute subversion of all Morality.[58]

It is in this metaphysical rather than occasionalist, legal-political sense, that from the very outset the mariner's seafaring is depicted as a transgressive pursuit. What troubles Coleridge, then, is not the occasional, wayward act of injustice but sin as a systemic, institutional *practice*—viz., as the very essence of modern instrumental reason. The slave trade merely throws into conspicuous relief the "'neo-pagan' character of . . . political economy and its outright celebration of what Christian theology rejected, namely, the *libido dominandi*." Cued by the radical contingency of economic processes and their incalculable interaction with sudden economic contraction, overpopulation, and the resultant fluctuation of labor-costs and the price of essential provisions—that is, anticipating the pessimism of Malthus and Ricardo rather than echoing the optimism of Steuart and Smith—Coleridge's *Rime* exposes the precarious metaphysical place of Modernity. The more specific manifestation of this dilemma is that of an eighteenth-century "economic theodicy . . . conjoined with an evangelicalism focused on a narrow, individualist practical reason which excludes the generous theoretical contemplation of God and the world," the latter having been "thinned down to a simple acceptance of positive revealed data which ensures salvation."[59] In short, economics (*qua* slavery) is not the true concern of the *Rime* sequestered behind a surfeit of symbolic allusions and

metaphysical concerns. Rather, the true catastrophe of Modernity lies in its unconditionally espousing a means/end model of rationality as the sole way of being in the world—thereby morphing Aristotelian or Augustinian notions of the good into a strictly economic and utilitarian calculation of contingent advantages.

Hence, for Stanley Cavell, the Mariner's nautical exploits serve as an extended figuration of modernity as inherently sinful, an *epoch* entirely *sui generis* inasmuch as it involves "a mental line to be crossed that is interpreted as a geographical or terrestrial border" (Cavell 46). Unlike more conventionally symbolist readings of the *Rime* as encrypted theology (Penn Warren's account above all),[60] Cavell's perceptive discussion does not approach the *Rime* as a mere allegory of the Fall but, "on the contrary, . . . take[s] it to provide an explanation of why it fits the Fall, that is, of what the Fall is itself an allegory of." The Fall is not the poem's proper meaning but only serves as our figurative conduit to it. What is being allegorized is, ultimately, "the threat of skepticism [as] a natural or inevitable presentiment of the human mind. . . . The beginning of skepticism is the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation, hence the creation of want, or desire."[61] Cavell's intertexts here are those of Kant and a well-known passage from the twelfth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria* where Coleridge posits that "the first principle" of a philosophical system is "to render the mind intuitive of the *spiritual* in man (i.e., of that which lies on the other side of our natural consciousness) . . . in truth a land of darkness, a perfect *Anti-Goshen* for men to whom the noblest treasures of their own being are reported only through the imperfect translation of lifeless and sightless *notions*."[62] For Coleridge, the first casualty of modernity will necessarily be what he calls "the spiritual in man." Its demise is necessarily hastened by modernity's principled embrace of a skeptical (which is to say, inherently *re*active) and methodical paradigm of knowledge that unrelentingly scrutinizes whatever is merely intuitive and hence indemonstrable *for others*.

That skepticism is not merely a sudden consequence of the mariner's capricious act of killing can be inferred from the cryptic and uneasy geography of the ship's course. To begin with, Coleridge's mariner and his crew are obviously no ordinary sailors; theirs is "a ship with no rank or hierarchy at a time when ships were *all* rank and hierarchy."[63] Furthermore, their palpably anti-realist journey features no stated goal or purpose but, in the same way that it is so compulsively and coercively retold to the wedding guest, unfolds as a mere accretion of discrete moments strung up like so many beads with the help of

the ever-same conjunctive phrases: "*And now* there came both mist and snow, / *And* it grew wondrous cold: / *And* ice, mast-high, came floating by" (ll. 51–53); "*At length* did cross an Albatross" (l. 63); "*And* a good south wind sprung up behind" (l. 71); "*And* the good south wind still blew behind" (l. 87; italics mine), etc. As is evident from its strictly sequential presentation, the *Rime*'s nautical trope proffers a quintessentially modern paradigm of experience whose import the Mariner can distil and legitimate only by appealing to criteria that have yet to be derived from whatever counts as experience. As most of the poem's readers concede, Coleridge's *récit* thus centers on a concept of open-ended experience and strictly hypothetical knowledge from which no return is possible. For Simpson, "the Mariner's return to his 'own countrée' is not an act of reintegration into an intact local community, but a further exacerbation of his isolation and his inability to live in his actual place and time." Likewise, Blumenberg regards "shipwreck [as] something like the 'legitimate' result of seafaring, and a happily reached harbor or serene calm on the sea is only the deceptive face of something that is deeply problematic."[64]

In his landmark study, Hans Jonas points to Gnosticism's central notion of the "alien," an "attribute of the 'Life' that is by its nature alien to this world. . . . The alien is that which stems from elsewhere and does not belong here. To those who do belong here it is thus the strange, the unfamiliar and incomprehensible; but their world on its part is just as incomprehensible to the alien that comes to dwell here." Coleridge's Mariner reflects Hans Jonas's criteria of "spirit" (*pneuma*) gone astray in an incommensurable world quite precisely; like the Gnostics' spirit, the Mariner "suffers the lot of the stranger who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehended, and uncomprehending in a situation full of danger. Anguish and homesickness are a part of the stranger's lot."[65] Likewise, few poems illustrate more powerfully the "twofold aspect of the cosmic terror, the spatial and the temporal" (Jonas 53). In sharp contrast to the methodological harnessing of "error" as a crucial, positive element in the self-regulating (dialectical) progression of modern Reason, the Gnostics saw "error" (πλᾶνή) very much as Coleridge also sees it, namely, as a wandering, a roaming, a going astray from which the embodied mind can never recover within the material world. This impasse above all accounts for the *Rime*'s starkly anti-mimetic idiom as well as for the persistent disequilibrium between tropes so abundant throughout the poem and its altogether enigmatic topography; Harold Bloom's passing remark that "in poetry, a 'place' is *where* something is *known*, but a figure or trope is *when*

something is willed or desired" applies particularly well to the *Rime*, with its insistent subversion of familial (Scriptural) *topoi* and stable topographical references by enigmatic and haunting tropes.[66]

The condition of journey exemplified by the Mariner's opaque nautical explorations, meanwhile, points not only to the "transcendental homelessness" that Georg Lukács was later to identify as the epistemological signature of modern narrative; it is also the symptom of an originally Cartesian skepticism from which, as Hegel was to argue, one can never return but which, faced with the impossibility of return, the modern individual ought to pursue to its logical conclusion: "The skepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss." It is in the nature of consciousness to "go beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself. . . . Thus consciousness suffers violence at its own hands. . . . It can find no peace. If it wishes to remain in a state of unthinking inertia, then thought troubles its thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia." Cartesian skepticism, then, remains a contingent and incomplete practice, a "conceit which understands how to belittle every truth, in order to turn back into itself and gloat over its own understanding, which knows how to dissolve every thought and always find the same barren Ego instead of any content" (*PS* 51–52).

All this explains why "Coleridge (in the 1798 poem) make[s] us work out where the ship is going by deduction from the Mariner's report of where the sun rises and sets? Why does he blur the rather simple geography?"[67] Giving rise to itself by its own defiant or skeptical act—a primordial violation of nature—modern consciousness can never again appeal to external realities but must generate and refine a strictly *discursive* map of an exclusively *mental* world devoid of any relation (positive or negative) to so-called nature.[68] With the breakdown of philosophical realism (i.e., models of mind-object correspondence), the process of verification and the notion of truth have themselves been decisively altered. For, as Hegel puts it, "the criterion of testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is" (*PS* 54–55). The reason that it helps to dwell on Hegel's proposed remedy to this dilemma—namely, that "consciousness provides its own criterion [of knowledge] from within itself, so that the investigation

becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself" (*PS* 53)—is that it essentially reenacts the Cartesian skepticism at a higher level and so proposes to solve the original dilemma of skepticism (viz., the loss of cosmological stability) by repeating the original transgression. Hence, Hegel characterizes the overall narrative project of his *Phenomenology* as "self-perfecting skepticism" (*dieser sich vollbringende Skeptizismus* [*PS* 50/*PG* 67]).

It is precisely this Hegelian route towards redemption by "twofold negation" that Coleridge is *not* prepared to take, primarily because of its ethical indifference to the cosmos. For as soon as we shift from speculative thinking to material action, the most obvious equivalent for disputing the reality of otherness would be to analyze, to anatomize, and ultimately, to kill. At the very least, in drawing out that analogy, we understand how modernity's self-authorizing agent, having created himself by a primal act of skepticism, must henceforth inhabit a condition of ethical limbo that this act *prima facie* created. Within the narrative purview of Coleridge's poem and, more emphatically yet, in his later prose writings, skepticism thus proves nothing less than sin. Hence, too, the long tradition of interpreting Coleridge's *Rime* by taking recourse to some causal logic (most famously in Robert Penn Warren's reading) or by adverting to the apparent lack of any causal logic (Empson, Bostetter) was bound to miss the most salient point.[69] What separates the wedding guest's anxious question ("Why look'st thou so?") and the Mariner's bland response ("With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross!" [ll. 81–82]) is a mere dash that pointedly forecloses any causal explanation. For the mariner's act is one of "motive-less malignity" (Cavell 56), a radical instance of skepticism that categorically denies reality to another being. The killing of the albatross launches the ship of modernity on its journey into what the likewise seafaring young Wordsworth recalls as "unknown modes of being."

I work the metaphor as hard as I do here to underscore that from here on tropes and linguistic markers are the only remaining substratum wherein one may hope to recover a community or, at least, mourn its permanent loss. For the ontological transformation wrought by the killing of the Albatross effectively destroys the ancient notion of community as a normative (non-negotiable and non-contingent) framework; it is precisely this shift that Louis Dupré has in mind when speaking of modernity's passage from cosmos to nature.[70] As Daniel Watkins notes, "to follow the Mariner's journey is to witness the breakup of a strong community and the emergence of the isolated

individual in history. When the Mariner's ship begins its adventures, it leaves a stable and conventional society behind, exemplified most clearly by the Christian values that critics have always recognized; this departure is followed by the disintegration of community on the ship (seen explicitly in the growing inability of the mariners to speak, that is, in the drying up of meaningful social exchange)."[71] To generations of readers mystified by the vexing asymmetry between the poem and its gloss, to say nothing of the reams of commentary that have accrued around the *Rime* over the past two-hundred years, language itself thus appears as a troublingly amorphous sea of differential and often inchoate signs.[72] Unsurprisingly, the only salvation (such as it is) for the Mariner's existential dilemma involves the expressive mobilization of his "strange power of speech." Leaving aside the thorny issue of how the poem's eventual 1817 gloss further complicates a world denuded of all object relations and so burdens consciousness with infinite exegetical labor and lexical discrimination (the task that Coleridge's *Notebooks* elaborate under the heading of "desynonymization"), we can already see in the 1798 version that the Mariner's entire act of telling is one compulsive, if also necessarily inconclusive attempt at catching up with the narrative's myriad implications.[73] Cut adrift from all communal and object relations, the Mariner's emblematic impersonation of the modern condition is above all defined and circumscribed by his "strange power of speech." As Hegel was to elaborate in his *Phenomenology*, such a post-lapsarian state of affairs consigns the modern individual to the Sisyphean labor of constantly having to secure "uptake" or "acknowledgment" for strictly virtual, textually mediated *notions* that are no longer referentially anchored in any objective reality or nature.[74] As a result, "the world has become more mysterious and more threatening, an environment that puts under pressure the homiletic or proverbial rules of operation ('He prayeth best, who loveth best') to which one turns for guidance" (Simpson, 153).

At this point, we can begin to delve into some of Coleridge's late prose in order to sharpen our understanding of the Mariner's defining act of skepticism and its consequent inauguration of modernity as *epoch*. In his *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge identifies his "one great and inclusive postulate and moral axiom" to be "the actual being of a *responsible Will*." What is "meant by the Will [is] distinct from all other conceptions," in particular the notion of "instinct," a term that "implies a necessitation, 'Instinctus', a goading or pricking" that, though "accompanied with sensation and consciousness, still we do not designate it as a will

as long as it is contemplated as an effect, the <sufficient> cause of which pre-existed in an antecedent" (*OM* 17). By contrast, the will is a primal and ineffable force that creates a new reality rather than reacting to the one given; it is, in Coleridge's words, "the *power of originating a state*." Such a demiurgic conception of the will connects Coleridge's Romanticism to the metaphysical dilemma first broached by Gnosticism.[75] For it shows how the self-origination of the modern individual through an unconditional act of will is bound to reoccupy on a psychological level, however unwittingly, the role of the ancients' demiurge-creator. Hence, commentators on the *Rime* have often noted the sudden deterioration of a putatively benevolent deity into a menacing and demonic force. For Edward Bostetter, "the rulers of the universe . . . are revealed as holding the same contempt for human life that the Mariner held for the bird's life" (69). Similarly, Daniel P. Watkins notes how the Mariner, "no longer an integral part of his community," comes to represent "individualism at its most vicious" (31) and how the "killing of the Albatross, an apparently arbitrary act[,] . . . sets into motion the transmogrification of Christian power into demonic power" (26). While Coleridge would likely have agreed with that reading, his later writings also suggest that he would have strongly disputed the apparent premise, namely, that the particular nature of Mariner's act had *caused* this "Christian universe gone mad" (Bostetter 75) and, hence, that some other act could have spared the Mariner (and his repeatedly co-opted audience) all the trouble. In fact, the poem's central conflict constitutes no mere rational puzzle; rather, it restages the ontological dilemma that will confront human agency at the precise moment when it has *actively* intervened in the cosmos by assuming the role of its unsuccessful demiurge-creator. As Coleridge puts it in *Aids to Reflection*, "a Sin is an Evil which has its ground or origin in the Agent, and not in the compulsion of Circumstances. Circumstances are compulsory from the absence of a power to resist or control them." To be sure, there is evil that arises from circumstances, but "such evil is not *sin*" inasmuch as true sin "can never be applied to a mere *link* in a chain of effects" (*AR* 266–67). The words "origin, original, or originant" thus are strict corollaries of the idea of sin. Indeed, Coleridge notes,

> the phrase, Original Sin, is a Pleonasm . . . For if it be Sin, it must be original: and a State or Act, that has not its origin in the will, may be calamity, deformity, disease, or mischief; but a *Sin* it cannot be. . . . Sin is Evil having an *Origin*. But inasmuch as it is *evil*, in God it cannot originate: and yet in some *Spirit* (i.e. in some *supernatural* power) it *must*. For in *Nature* there

> is no origin. Sin is therefore spiritual Evil: but the spiritual in Man is the Will. . . . the corruption must have been self-originated.[76]

In so manifesting the ontological condition of the human ("If there be aught *Spiritual* in Man, the Will must be such" [*AR* 135]), the will points to a radical and (to Coleridge) profoundly unsettling freedom. "The Will is ultimately self-determined, or it is no longer a *Will* under the law of perfect Freedom, but a *Nature* under the mechanism of cause and effect" (*AR* 285). Hence the will necessarily eludes analysis and causal representation, for "it is evidently not the result or aggegate of a composition but an *ens simplicissimum*, and therefore incapable of explication or explanation" (*OM* 18); it eludes self-knowledge, for it "cannot be an object of conception" inasmuch as it has "absolute antecedency in the necessity of thought and [is] without any relation to time" (*OM* 18–19); and, finally, the will also eschews all responsibility inasmuch as it is not cued (positively or negatively) by anything anterior to its own enactment.

In contesting the reality of the cosmos, subjecting it to the causal procedures of verification or falsification, the Cartesian and Hobbesian self-originating act of will reveals the ethical dimension of modern skepticism: its inescapably sinful, transgressive constitution. In his marginalia to Descartes, Coleridge thus identifies the rigorously disjunctive logic of Cartesian reflection as its basic "sin": "This utter disanimation of Body, and its, *not* opposition, but contrariety . . . to Soul, as the assumed Basis of Thought and Will . . . is the *peccatum originale* of Cartesian System."[77] Inherently skeptical in its particularized expression, the will *per se* denatures, indeed destroys the world, converting it from an inherited "dwelling" into alien or virtual matter for experimental speculation, a shift whose dissociative quality is starkly illustrated by the notorious roll of the dice for the souls of the crew in the *Rime*. Being "not a mere mode of our consciousness, but presupposed therein" (*OM* 73), conscience relates to consciousness as does the redeemer to the demiurge in Gnosis. With characteristic impatience, Coleridge strains to articulate this Gnostic crisis within the modern self, even as "our present language fails in affording a term sufficiently discriminative." For if we are to understand "self-knowledge in this latter, higher sense of the term 'Self,'" it is necessary to posit the "conscire," that is, not merely a percipient or holistic sentient state, which animals also possess, but "to know something in relation to myself in and with the act of knowing myself as acted on by that something. . . . thus: the third pronoun '*he,*' '*it,*' etc. could

never have been contradistinguished from the first, but 'I,' 'me,' etc. but by means of the second. There could be no '*He*' without a previous '*Thou*'" (*OM* 73–75). It is the "Thou" whose ethical reality the Mariner seeks to reaffirm time and again, in apparent compensation for his primal transgression. Transfixed with magnetic or mesmeric force, the wedding guest thus becomes the medium that will allow the Mariner to transmogrify the mere consciousness of his own, randomly volitional and solitary act into a social knowledge—a communal awareness (*conscire*) without which there could be no such thing as "conscience" or "remorse."

As Coleridge's vivid imagery (the "glittering eye") suggests, his Mariner is no conventional, "realist" character but a quintessentially modern *type*—what Georg Simmel calls "the stranger," whose identity is suspended between that of the mere traveler and that of a person "truly at home."[78] A condensation of the Cartesian skeptic and the Hobbesian solitary individual whose volitional acts of experimentation and objectification produce an unhinged, radically contingent cosmos, the Mariner can only hope to grasp at and contain the meaning of his self-creating deed through the supplemental practices of symbolic narration, which in turn will require further acts of textual exegesis (e.g., the Gloss in the 1817 *Rime*) as well as a whole array of secondary, methodological reflections. Yet these supplemental practices cannot but perpetuate the Mariner's original and all-consuming anxiety, a holistic mood that defines the modern individual as it grapples with the consequences of its self-creating hubris. From the poem's very opening lines and repeated references to the "bright-eyed" Mariner to his late acknowledgment that "this frame of mine was wrenched / With a woeful agony" (ll. 578–79), it is precisely this anxiety that defines his subjectivity and proffers it to us as a parable of modernity. Daniel P. Watkins speaks of "the existential angst of the Mariner" (24), an observation whose true significance, however, is readily lost if such *Angst* is once again construed in merely causal terms—that is, as supposedly arising from an empirical conflict between base and superstructure. Premised on vulgar Marxism's false methodological choice of proceeding "historically rather than psychologically," such reasoning is palpably unaware of its own metaphysical presuppositions.[79] Simpson rightly cautions that the *Rime* "is not about a conventional 'experience,' and thus cannot be simply hooked into a straightforward realist exegesis whereby we can test out what we think really 'happened' against what is described in the poem" (154).

Existential *Angst* constitutes an all-encompassing phenomenon throughout the poem—taken as both the *récit* of a bizarre story and a recurrent narrative performance forever vexing and paralyzing its listeners. Just before the apparent death of his shipmates, the Mariner recalls the terror of inhabiting a world without community, devoid of any accepted ethical norms, obligations, or communal ties: "Fear at my heart, as at a cup, / My life-blood seemed to sip! / The stars were dim, and thick the night, / The steersman's face by his lamp gleamed white" (208–11). Above all, it is the curious deployment of the Eucharist as a simile ("as at a cup, / My life-blood seemed to sip") for an all-encompassing fear that points to something markedly askew in the poem's superficially redemptive turn. Notwithstanding the Mariner's apparent spiritual restoration at the end of section IV (ll. 292–95), such *Angst* will remain in effect throughout the poem and beyond, where it will metastasize to the countless instances of its future retelling. For whatever spirituality the modern individual may be able to achieve, it will be a creed categorically different than the one that had prevailed prior to modernity's sinful inauguration of the free will. As Coleridge was to put it in *Aids to Reflection*:

> How deeply seated the conscience is in the human Soul is seen in the effect which sudden Calamities produce on guilty men, even when unaided by any determinate notion or fears of punishment after death. The wretched Criminal, as one rudely awakened from a long sleep, bewildered with the new light, and half recollecting, half striving to recollect, a fearful something, he knows not what, but which he will recognize as soon as he hears the name, already interprets the calamities into *judgments*, Executions of a Sentence passed by an *invisible* Judge . . . Remorse is the *implicit* Creed of the Guilty. (*AR* 127–28)

Coleridge's modern individual—the perpetrator of a volitional and literally groundless skepticism that denatures and unhinges all cosmological order—thus also precipitates its own irreversible psychological instability. Even as it furnishes the blueprint for what to this day we understand by knowledge and critique, the modern *vita activa* invariably reenacts the primordial transgression whose consequences it seeks to contain. It does so not by violating some known positive law or injunction; nor indeed does it bring down retribution on itself in the form of a permanently destabilized and anxious interiority, merely by intentionally willing something obviously or even contingently evil.[80] Rather, the metaphysical repercussions (captured by Coleridge's reading of "original sin" as a pleonasm) of modernity's active interven-

tion in the cosmos arise from its random, gratuitously experimental assertion of creative influence—a capricious theoretical curiosity to do something merely in order to see what will happen next.

As the above passage and also the entirety of the *Rime* suggest, what happens next is, of course, the advent of interiority, of the modern psyche as "unhappy consciousness" (Hegel), as a "prison-house" (Wordsworth), or some other "punctual self" (Charles Taylor) whose isolated nightmare existence is the stuff of narrative from Coleridge through Kafka. Within philosophical modernity, this predicament has received particularly searching expression in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, particularly his exploration of *Angst* as an ontological disposition. For Heidegger, "*that about which one has* Angst *is being-in-the-world as such*" (*BT* 174/*SZ* 186) and, again: "*That about which* Angst *is anxious is being-in-the-world itself.* Being anxious discloses, primordially and directly, the world as world. . . . *Angst* as a mode of attunement first discloses the *world as world*" (*BT* 175/*SZ* 187). As a "mood" or negative "attunement" (*Stimmung*) rather than a contingent and remediable instance of "fear," Heideggerian *Angst* captures the total narrative thrust of Coleridge's *Rime* remarkably well; for it is the inescapable disposition of an ontologically isolated (and only intermittently socialized) self whose disastrous journey has brought it face to face with its ontological freedom. As should be obvious, such freedom bears no affinity to contingent historico-political idea of modern "liberty." Instead, *Angst*

> reveals in Da-sein its *being toward* its ownmost potentiality of being, that is, *being free for* . . . choosing and grasping itself. *Angst* brings Da-sein *before its being free for* . . . (*propensio in*), the authenticity of its being as possibility which it always already is. In *Angst* one has an "uncanny" feeling. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Da-sein finds itself involved in with *Angst* initially finds expression: the nothing and nowhere. But uncanniness means at the same time not-being-at-home. . . . Everyday familiarity collapses. Da-sein is individuated, but *as* being-in-the-world.[81]

For Heidegger, *Angst* thus appears as an ontological condition likely to play itself out in any variety of expressive and conceptual settings—such as Romantic melancholy, Marxist alienation, Modernist dissociation, etc. By contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* locates *Angst* in the obverse scenario—viz. one characterized by the total interconnectivity and implicit equivalence of all particulars under the methodological guidance of Bacon's *mathesis universalis*. A precise inversion of Heideggerian *estrangement*, *Angst* here defines a

world exhaustively framed within a single conceptual matrix: "Man imagines himself free from fear [*Furcht*] when there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization, of enlightenment, which conflates the animate with the inanimate just as myth conflates the inanimate with the animate. Enlightenment is mythic anxiety [*Angst*] turned radical. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a so to speak universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of anxiety [*Angst*]" (*DE* 16; trans. modified). Readings of the *Rime* such as have been offered by Bostetter or, more recently, by Daniel Watkins's as a "portrayal of . . . social relations in crisis" (31) are fundamentally correct. Yet to isolate, as Watkins does, the crisis of the *Rime* as reflecting the "triumphant individualism of the 1790s" (32) is to remain identified with the historicist (and in tendency nominalist) paradigm of knowledge as the institutional synthesis of so much impersonal, specialized, and dissociated information. Yet as Coleridge, long before Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment, had contended (and I agree), such a procedure unwittingly applies Modernity's mythic quest for the total and preemptive methodological stabilization of (aesthetic) experience—"conflat[ing] the animate with the inanimate"—to a poem that is itself deeply critical of precisely that kind of procedure.

As both its agonizing frame-narrative (i.e., the Mariner detaining a wedding guest with a narrative about the collapse of community) and its nautical master-trope makes clear, Coleridge's *Rime* signifies less by some straightforward referential commerce with the Real than by performatively tracing the deleterious impact of individual, skeptical, and instrumentalized rationality on the nature of what Nancy has analyzed as modernity's "inoperative community." The crisis explored in the *Rime* ultimately harkens back to the collapse of the public/private distinction during the Hellenistic period and to the subsequent emergence of the "social," a concept that already announces the defeat of normativity by utility, of intuition by institution, and of virtuous action by demographic behavior. As Arendt, McIntyre, and in more orthodox language John Milbank have all argued, these shifts jointly permeate and implicitly define the moral, theological, cultural, and political economies of European Modernity. In constituting itself as a progressive, transformative, and self-legitimating *epoch*, Modernity relies on a handful of mutually reinforcing notions (freedom, Rights, individuality, productivity, utility, progress) all of which implicitly presuppose a means/end rationality that, since the seventeenth century,

has been implemented largely without questioning (including in our professional, institutional, and disciplinary pursuits). John Milbank provocatively argues that Weber's commitment to *sociology* as the quintessence of modern disciplinarity begs its questions on a grand scale. For in his *Religionssoziologie*, for example, Weber "confines himself to the vague, unhistorical level of 'elective affinity' between religious belief and economic practice, and sees Protestantism's uniqueness as lying in its transference of asceticism to a totally 'this-worldly' sphere of activity." Yet precisely the category of a "'this-worldly' sphere," Milbank argues, is "assumed by Weber *a priori*. . . . By contrast, the point about theological influence on modern economic practice was not the transference of asceticism to this world, but rather the theological *invention* of 'this world,' of the secular as a realm handed over by God to human instrumental manipulation."[82] What is a radically contingent act of self-origination, undertaken without any determinate cause or intention, thus burdens modern subjectivity with the frightful bequest of ontological *Angst*.

In Coleridge's parable of the modern, Cartesian self, the latter is thus perpetually haunted by the awareness that its self-originating individuality may announce the return of a long repressed heresy, that of the free, Gnostic demiurge. *Angst* and the transposed attribute of "infinity" thus emerge as the most disturbing twin implications of modern epistemological, economic, and cultural agency, one that can only sustain itself as a dialectic between purely experimental and ultimately irresponsible acts and the endless task of containing the unpredictable outcomes of these acts through the supplemental labor of modern (ostensibly secular) narrative and exegetical industry. A capacious understanding of Romanticism's place within modernity will elude us as long as our disciplinary, professional, and institutional habits are unreflexively premised on such notions as the public sphere, possessive individualism, an axiomatically secular (means/end) model of rationality, and a disciplinary and professional concept of labor alternately fashioned or critiqued by the modern discourses of political economy and academic Marxism. As Hannah Arendt has shown, both discourses prove equally oblivious of the pre-modern, albeit enduring distinction between labor and work.[83] As long as these and similar categories intrinsic to modernity remain unscrutinized and are simply deployed, our own disciplinary practices will simply replicate modernity's core assumption: namely, that transformational processes are intrinsically and unconditionally good, and that they may be adequately legitimated by our appeal to and speculative reliance on a purely hypostatized

future outcome. Once committed to this key premise (and along with it to an utopian streak that equally informs Scottish political economy, Godwinian anarchism, Blakean millenarianism, Painite radicalism, as well as Fabianism and the contemporary socialist visions of Fourier, St. Simon, Marx et al.), modernity will also, however unwittingly, reoccupy an early Christian eschatological model. By dint of its linear and teleological architecture, eschatological thought necessarily invests history with a number of constants, quite regardless of the particular project of self-description and -legitimation it helps sponsor. This holds also, indeed especially, true for modernity's grand narratives of "secularization" (Hegel, Marx, M. Weber, E. Durkheim), which in the absence of such constants could never read history as a self-regulating, pluralistic, teleological progression, even less could they determine their own disciplinary and institutional role within it.

In supplanting the Stoic notion of providence (*pronoia*) with eschatology, early Christianity had initially established the conditions for a process of secularization that, much later, would "transpose eschatology into a progressive history" (*LMA* 32). Two of the central implications (or dilemmas) of early Christian theology, which had arisen in response to a number of "heresies" (Gnosticism, Stoicism, Manicheanism, etc.), prove especially important for Romanticism's critique of, or at least highly ambivalent outlook on, modernity. First, there arose what Blumenberg calls an "eschatological 'state of emergency'" (1985, 45) when the New Testament's "immediate expectation" of the end of world and time (*parousia*) failed to occur, and when that expectation's "untranslatability into any concept of history" had to be confronted. In the absence of the *eschaton*, the sheer durability of the cosmos, its *having* a "history," presented a major challenge to philosophical speculation. What had to be formulated in response was some notion of history as a trans-generational process, one whose metaphysical significance would depend on an active type of speculative curiosity (Descartes's *vigilantia laboriosa*) furnishing rational explanations that would compensate for the conspicuous non-appearance or, at least, indefinite deferral of the *eschaton*. As a result, post-Cartesian thought gradually converts the *eschaton* that had once been the focus of the *vita contemplativa* into a utopia to be ushered in by the rational and methodical consciousness of the modern *vita activa*: "the idea of progress is precisely not a mere watered-down form of judgment or revolution; it is rather the continuous self-justification of the present, by means of the future that it gives itself, before the past, with which it compares itself" (Blumenberg 1985, 32).

A second and more troubling implication that arose along with the discovery of history as a metaphysical problem confronted speculative thought with the perplexing migration of what, until now, had been the sole attribute of god (which early Christian theology had taken on from Plotinus): the predicate of "infinity." In its own struggle with a wholly abstract (mathematical) conception of space and time, the modern self (particularly in the work of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Kant) once again encounters "infinity," though now not as plenitude but as sublime and terrifying emptiness. It can hardly surprise that eighteenth-century philosophy and science struggle so often seek to compensate for the unnerving implication of empty, infinite space and time by *inferring* from it, in a curious bit of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning, "the infinite extent of the divine presence."[84] What such attempts at deducing a divine presence from a material absence (i.e., of limits to space and time) had curiously forgotten was the fact that the alarming "infinity" of historical time and cosmological space had arisen from the *non-appearance* of the redeeming god to begin with. The ascription of infinity to the historical and cosmological worlds of which modernity sought to take progressive control betrays a persistent element of crisis and insecurity in modernity's projects of self-description. "As an attribute of progress," Blumenberg notes, "'infinity' is more a result of embarrassment and the retraction of a hasty conclusion than of usurpation" and "more a predicate of indefiniteness than of fulfilling dignity" (*LMA* 84–85). Indeed, he continues, "our discontent with progress is discontent not only with its results but also with the indefinite character of its course, the lack of distinctive points, intermediate goals, or even final goals. The recovery of the finitude of history by means of the idea of a final and conclusive revolution that brings the process of history to a standstill is made attractive, as an antithesis to infinite progress, by that very progress itself" (*LMA* 85–86). Attesting to the persistent and corrosive power of Gnostic speculation, the metaphysical anxiety in question also explains the *ennui*, disorientation, and melancholia of bourgeois individuals that pervades so much nineteenth-century literature (Byron, Austen, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Fontane, Mann et al.). For the attribute of infinity proves logically incompatible with the idea of progress, which demands an intuitive and non-negotiable norm or *telos* (e.g., Aristotelian "virtue" or even Machiavellian "glory") to whose fulfillment an agent or community is pledged and from which the practices of material and social life may derive their legitimation. Yet the attribute of infinity, which since the rise of political economy had

in effect created a new psychology exemplified by post-civic man, a creature who "has ceased to be virtuous, not only in the formal sense that he has become the creature of his own hopes and fears" but also in that "he does not even live in the present, except as constituted by his fantasies concerning a future, . . . [thus] plac[ing] the performance of covenants forever beyond the new Tantalus's reach and le[aving] him to live by dreaming of it."[85] Coleridge's overall project was to tabulate the costs of a modernity that could only launch itself by dividing the human psyche between skeptical self-assertion and the supplemental creed of "remorse"—thus reviving (however unwittingly) Gnosticism's split between the primal fraud of material creation and our infinitely deferred redemption from the stranglehold of the alien god.

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NOTES

1 Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1985) 128–29; henceforth cited parenthetically as *LMA*.—For their thoughtful responses and critical suggestions, I thank Rob Mitchell, Frances Ferguson, Richard Macksey, Simon During, Joshua Gonsalvez, David Wagenknecht, David Collings, Noel Jackson, Denise Gigante, and numerous other engaged participants at the 2006 NASSR conference at Purdue, as well as at Rice U, Johns Hopkins U, and SUNY Buffalo, where I had the opportunity to present versions of this essay.

2 Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (New York: Anchor, 1999) 68–69.

3 *Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993) 74.

4 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 20, 17; henceforth cited parenthetically as *PS*.

5 Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. 1972. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum) 23; on the connection between nominalism and historicism, see James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 53–73; henceforth cited parenthetically as *DE*.

6 *Notebooks*, vol. 3 (1808–1819), ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), no. 3628.

7 Speaking of this "most momentous . . . reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*," Hannah Arendt elaborates: "the point was not that truth and knowledge were no longer important, but that they could be won only by 'action' and not by contemplation. . . . The reasons for trusting *doing* and for distrusting *contemplation* or *observation* became more cogent after the results of the first active inquiries." One must not misconstrue this reversal—achieved above all with the help of instruments and, especially, the paradigm of "mathematical knowledge, where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind"—as simply "raising doing to the rank of contemplation as the highest state of which human beings are capable." For as the "handmaiden of doing," all active thinking and its implicit vision of discrete knowledges moving towards a *mathesis*

universalis effectively eclipsed the value of contemplation altogether; *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 289–91; henceforth cited parenthetically as *HC*.

8 Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (New York: Cambridge UP) 277, 278; on Pascal, see Erich Auerbach's "On the Political Theory of Pascal," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

9 Jürgen Mittelstrass, "Bildung und Wissenschaft. Enzyklopädien in historischer und wissens-soziologischer Betrachtung," *Die wissenschaftliche Redaktion* 4 (1967): 83–104; on the topos-history of "the book of nature," see Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986) 162–79. See also Martin Heidegger's brilliant analyses of the epochal shift between ancient and modern models of knowledge in "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950); trans. "The Age of the World Picture," in Heidegger, *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

10 Blumenberg, *LMA*, 238; more than anything, it is the rise of modern professionalism that has vanquished the classical, eudemonistic conception of knowledge as *theoria* and *thaumazein* ("wonder"). See Magali Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977), Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), Richard Ohman, *Politics of Knowledge: the Commercialization of the University, the Professions, and Print Culture* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2003), Jennifer Ruth, *Novel Professions: Interested Disinterest and the Making of the Professional in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio UP, 2006), and my own *Wordsworth's Profession* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 25–27, 105–13.

11 For the most incisive critique of the numerous assumptions standing behind the habitually deployed concept of "secularization," see Blumenberg, *LMA*, 3–121; on Historicism's implicit ethos of retroactive liberation, see my "Reading beyond Redemption: Historicism, Irony, and the *Lessons of Romanticism*," in *Lessons of Romanticism*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1998).

12 For an excellent account of the Aristotelian position, see McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981) 146–64; henceforth cited parenthetically as *AV*.

13 *Rights of Man*, ed. Eric Foner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 42.

14 Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1986) 62; on the theoretical assumptions standing behind (and propping up the argumentative force) of specific dates (especially in the New Historicism), see Deborah E. White, "Imagination's Date: A Postscript to the Biographia Literaria," *European Romantic Review* 14 (2003): 467–78. For a thorough exposure of the theoretical premises of (Romantic) Historicism, see Chandler, *England in 1819*, 47–93; on the general problem of historical time, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 233–72; in his recent, magisterial study of modernity and secularization, Charles Taylor draws a sharp contrast between the complex and polyvalent conception of time in pre-modern communities and the strictly "horizontal flow of secular time" since the seventeenth century, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007) 55–61.

15 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004) 272–73.

16 *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. and ed. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1985) 47.

17 On sociology's inability to conceptualize the larger process of modernity (of which sociology is itself a disciplinary and institutional effect), see John Milbank's account of Max Weber: "Weberian sociology betrays and subverts history. It takes as an a *priori* principle of sociological investigation what should be the *subject* of genuine historical enquiry: namely, the emergence of a secular polity, the modern *imagining* of incommensurable value spheres and the possibility of a formal regulation of society." *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 91.

18 Blumenberg, *LMA*, 84–85, quotes from Pascal's *Traité de Vide* ("On Emptiness") as an early instance of this shift; for a related discussion, see Pfau, trans. and ed., *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory* (Albany: SUNY P, 1987) 2–11, and Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 312–18.

19 Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der neueren Philosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), vol. 2, 180–81; trans. mine.

20 On the rise of system, see Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); Clifford Siskin, "The Year of the System," in *1798: The Year of the* Lyrical Ballads, ed. Richard Cronin (New York: St. Martin's P, 1998), and Robert Mitchell, "The Fane of Tescalipoca: S. T. Coleridge on the Sacrificial Economies of Systems in the 1790s," SiR, forthcoming; aside from qualifying Siskin's taxonomy of systems in important ways, Mitchell also draws attention to a sacrificial logic integral to both conceiving and maintaining systems.

21 McIntyre, *AV* 26; this passage appears to echo a nearly identical comment by Adorno and Horkheimer: "Reason is the organ of calculation; it is neutral in regard to ends; its element is coordination" (*DE* 88); for an Augustinian radicalization of McIntyre's Aristotelian critique of modern rationalism, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 327–54.

22 *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 74; henceforth cited parenthetically as *AR*.

23 *Opus* Maximum, ed. Thomas McFarland (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002) 24–26; henceforth cited parenthetically as *OM*. As Coleridge elaborates elsewhere, "a Will conceived separately from Intelligence is a Non-entity, and a mere Phantasm of Abstraction; and that a Will, the state of which does in *no sense* originate in its own act, is an absolute contradiction. It might be an Instinct, an Impulse, a plastic Power, and, if accompanied with consciousness, a Desire; but a Will it could not be" (*AV* 141).

24 68; McIntyre's and Arendt's critiques of Utilitarianism are substantially anticipated in Hegel's *Phenomenology*; for Hegel, utilitarian thought posits that the value or significance of anything rests with how it accommodates or facilitates an end that remains forever contentless and purely formal ("pleasure"). Hence the "thing" itself (*die Sache selbst*) is "only a pure moment," a merely transitional factor; it can only ever be "absolute *for an other*," that is, a means to an end. For individuals or a given community organizing their private or social concerns in this manner is to commit to a wholly inexplicit and unexamined standard of "utility" as the new criterion of value and meaning. Hence, utilitarianism rests on two equally flawed assumptions: a) what *kinds* of things should count as useful; and b) that utility (a means/end rationality) should be the *only* standard or measure of value. In leaving these assumptions essentially unexamined or un-reflected, consciousness can only locate this "notion" of utility *in* (or project it *onto*) *an object* outside itself. For Hegel, utilitarianism thus constitutes indeed "a metaphysics, but not as yet the comprehension of it" (*PS* 354). As Charles Taylor puts it, "utilitarianism is . . . the ethic of the Enlightenment, . . . an ethic in which acts are judged according to their consequences." Yet to the extent that utilitarianism only ever assigns

instrumental significance to any particular thing or idea, it cannot articulate an end or "final purpose; or, as Hegel puts it, this chain of extrinsic justifications does not return to a self, that is to a subjxectivity which would encompass the whole development." We thus have "a bad infinity [*schlechte Unendlichkeit*]." *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 181; henceforth cited parenthetically as *PS*.

25 *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 165, 154; henceforth cited as *HC*; important aspects of Arendt's argument reappear in Charles Taylor's capacious archeology of modern, secular, and constructivist agency—what he terms modernity's "willed constructive effort in the remaking of human life" (*A Secular Age*, 125).

26 It is ironic that contemporary Romantic Studies in North America should continue to maintain an overwhelmingly British focus (now and then disrupted by the occasional, stray theorist). In clinging to a happily (perhaps also nostalgically) insular, British paradigm, contemporary Romantic studies has effectively lost sight of the myriad strains of European intellectual, aesthetic, and philosophical history in which, ironically, most Romantic intellectuals understood themselves to be so intricately embedded. Likewise, it perplexes that even as late-eighteenth-century forms of cosmopolitan writing and emergent, global capitalist speculation and production steadily dissolved local communities and regional identities into an increasingly abstract model of nationhood—what Anthony Giddens calls "disembedding" with its consequent transmutation of "place into space"—the dominant, historicist mode of critique for the past two decades has implicitly reaffirmed the aura and integrity of local and affective communities; on this paradox, see Alan Liu, "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," *Representations* 32 (1990): 75–113, and Pfau, *Romantic Moods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005) 191–306.

27 With Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as crucial transitional figures, this shift culminates in by now canonical critiques of modernity that have appeared over the last eighty years or so. Aside from what may well be the Urtext of philosophical critiques of modernity, Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1928), other relevant texts would include Adorno and Horkheimer's *Critique of Enlightenment* (1946), Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), Hans Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), Alasdair McIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Modern Self* (1989), Anthony Giddens' *Consequences of Modernity* (1990), and John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (1991/2006); it goes without saying that these books follow very different methodological routes and reach often substantially different, at times diametrically opposed conclusions; my present argument primarily builds on Hans Blumenberg's influential, if also controversial, thesis. Blumenberg himself responds to some of his critics in the second (1976) edition of his *magnum opus*; for a judicious, at times sharply critical account of Blumenberg, see Robert Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem" (in Pippin, 1997).

28 On Gnosticism, see Kurt Rudolph, Gnosis: *The Nature & History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco, 1987), Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London/New York, 1979), Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963); for primary texts, see James M. Robinson's translation of the so-called Nag Hammadi Codex, in 1947/1948, arguably the most significant early Christian manuscript discovery of the twentieth century along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, and translated as *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden/New York, 1996); for extensive, up-to-date bibliographical references on Gnosticism, see Rudolph, 390–404. For an account of Gnostic cosmogonies, which both Rudolph and Jonas divide into Iranian (Zoroastrian) and Syrian-Egyptian strands, see Rudolph, 70–82.

29 Rudolph, 66; for a particularly concise account is found in the so-called Gospel of Philip: "The world came into being through a transgression. For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He failed and did not attain his hope. For the incorruption of the world did not exist and the inccoruption of him who made the world did not exist." From this primal miscarriage follow, in order, "anguish," "error" (πλᾶνή), which in turn sets to work on "matter" (ὑλή) by fashioning a "creature" (πλάσμα), a declension characteristic of the progressive deterioration of the "fullness" (πλήρομα) of the primal spirit in the Syrian-Egyptian Gnosis; *The Nag Hammadi Codex* II,3: 75, qtd. in Rudolph, 83.

30 On Marcion, see E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and his Influence* (London, 1948); for Marcion's writings, see *The Gospel of the Lord: an early version which was circulated by Marcion of Sinope as the original Gospel*, trans. James Hamlyn Hill (New York: AMS P, 1980); see also Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) 28–32, Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 313–16, and Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

31 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 304.

32 F. W. J. Schelling, Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutman (Chicago: Open Court, 1936) 10; henceforth cited parenthetically as *OHF*.

33 Unless otherwise referenced, Wordsworth's *Prelude* is quoted from *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).

34 Modern freedom's potential incompatibility with a meaningful notion of community emerges repeatedly in Nietzsche's ambivalent references to the "solitary predatory species of man." *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. and ed. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford UP), 114; Nietzsche's habitual references to the predatory sub-strata of the modern, "civilized" individual prove notoriously ambiguous. More than Freud, whose later writings make strikingly analogous claims, Nietzsche's prose persistently oscillates between positing these feral propensities as something primal and timeless or, alternatively, claiming that civilization has effectively tamed and atrophied these instincts once and for all. Thus he protests that "you utterly fail to understand beasts and men of prey (like Caesare Borgia), you fail to understand 'nature' if you are still looking for a 'disease' at the heart of these healthiest of tropical monsters and growths, or particularly if you are looking for some innate 'hell' in them—: as almost all of the moralists so far have done." *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 84–85. On the other hand, Nietzsche protests the atrophying of such "nature" by the unrelenting efforts of moral civilization: "Regrettably, man is no longer sufficiently evil; the opponents of Rousseau who claim that 'man is a predator' are, unfortunately, wrong. The true curse lies not in the depravity of man but in his being re-made as a decadent and moral being [*sondern seine Verzärtlichung und Vermoralisierung ist der Fluch*]." Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Munich, dtv, 1980), vol. 13: 421.

35 *OHF* 26; in an interesting aside on St. Augustine's conception of freedom, Blumenberg captures a key concern of nineteenth-century pessimism (Schopenhauer, Wagner, Flaubert, Nietzsche, Spengler) as it contests the affirmative premises of Romanticism and Classical Liberalism on this point: "Freedom confirms the goodness of God and His work in every case because it wills itself; indeed it wills itself independently of its moral quality. But falling back upon the reflexive structure of the will, which wills not only this or that but primarily itself as the condition of its concrete acts of choice, only moves the problem a step further back: *The will that wills itself is only free if it can also not will itself.* Here rationality breaks down;

reasons cannot be given for self-annihilation" (*LMA* 134); on this topic, see my "Freedom as the Problem of Modernity," *ERR* (forthcoming).

36 As the Secret Book of John, which forms part of the Nag Hammadi Codex, makes clear, Gnostic speculation does not consider it appropriate to think" of this primal beginning "as a God, or that he is of a (particular) sort: he is a dominion (*arch*) over which none rules; for there is none before him, nor does he need them (the gods); he does not even need life, for he is eternal" (qtd. in Rudolph, 63).

37 William Blake, *Complete Poetry & Prose*, ed. David Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1982) 70–73.

38 Bloom, *Agon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), 69; on Blake and Gnosticism, see my *Romantic Moods*, 98–111, Stuart Peterfreund, "Blake, Priestley, and the Gnostic Moment" in *Literature and Science: Theory and Practice* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1990) and Stuart Curran, "Blake and the Gnostic Hyle: a Double Negative," *Blake Studies* 4 (1972) 117–33.

39 Bloom 70, 58, 67.

40 *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 25; 30; trans. mine; on the Gnostic aspects in Hegel's philosophy of nature, see Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY P, 1994) 151–69.

41 Blumenberg proceeds to explore how "Gnosticism's systematic intention forced the Church, in the interest of consolidation, to define itself in terms of dogma. . . . To retrieve the world as the creation from the negative role assigned to it by the doctrine of its demiurgic origin, and to salvage the dignity of the ancient cosmos for its role in the Christian system, was the central effort all the way from Augustine to the height of Scholasticism" (*LMA* 130). My own concern is with the enduring consequences of Gnosticism for Romantic narrative, which struggles to reflect our vexed, disciplinary and institutional commitments to Modernity's paradigm of critical knowledge.

42 *LMA* 137; noting how the "path that for the species leads to *progress* from the worse to the better does not do so for the individual," Kant's "Speculative Beginning of Human History" thus resolves the Gnostic dilemma with a curious distinction between a twofold beginning: "The history of *nature*, therefore, begins with good, for it is God's work; the history of *freedom* begins with badness, for it is man's work. For the individual, who in the use of his freedom has regard only for himself, such a change was a loss; for nature, whose end for man concerns the species, it was a victory. Man, therefore, has cause to ascribe to himself the guilt for all the evil that he suffers and for all the bad that he perpetrates, while at the same time, as a member of the whole (of the species), admiring and praising the wisdom and purposefulness of the arrangement." Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983) 54.

43 For a provocative reading of political economy or "economic theodicy" in Smith and Steuart, see Milbank, 26–47. The story of this shift from a closed, cosmological to an open, entrepreneurial model of agency has, of course, been told from a multiplicity of perspectives; in the end, however, most accounts of what (echoing Anthony Giddens) Charles Taylor has termed "the great disembedding" converge on the trope of "secularization." Instances of that master-narrative include Taylor's *A Secular Age*, esp. 146–211 (which incorporates his earlier *Modern Social Imaginaries*), Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), esp. 15–92, as well as titles by Arendt, Cassirer, and Heidegger cited above.

44 Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, trans. Erich Blackall (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 273, 302 (last trans. modified).

45 *PS* 47; see also Hegel's later discussion of error in his chapter on "The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition," 333–34.

46 *LMA* 195–96; Blumenberg continues by noting how it is precisely the concept of freedom which in the realm of moral theory seeks to accomplish what Cartesian doubt had sought within formal epistemology: "the introduction of the concept of freedom into the theory of knowledge is an attempt to apply the paradigm of the transcendent incontestability of morality to theoretical self-assertion. A man may be chosen or condemned in the theological sense, destined for salvation or the opposite—but no 'external' agency can make him responsible for such a destiny."

47 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* [*WWR*], trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. I, 35.

48 *WWR* I: 353; for a discussion of this famous passage, see Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Randall (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1997) 59–65.

49 Referencing Purchas, Shelvocke, Cook, and Barents as intertexts mined by Coleridge, David Simpson proposes to read the *Rime* as, among other things, "a romantic variation upon the genre of voyage narratives" (153). For a full consideration of the trope, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Recently, Richard Berkeley has scrutinized Coleridge's imaginative use of the nautical trope in his 1817 discussion of Spinoza; "The Providential Wreck: Coleridge and Spinoza's Metaphysics," *European Romantic Review* 17,4 (2006): 457–75.

50 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), vol. 1, 370.

51 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, ed. Vincent Freimarck (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969); see esp. Lecture IV (vol. I, 74–102); flagging the "bold ellipses, the sudden transitions of the tenses, genders, and persons" (75) of the parabolic style, Lowth remarks on the apparent homology between "a mind violently agitated" and "the universal nature of things . . . being affected with similar emotions" (79). A direct descendant of language found in the writings of the Hebrew prophets, this intensely figurative, sublime idiom betokens, for Lowth and Coleridge alike, a cosmos in terminal disarray because its divine creator has in effect withdrawn from it.

52 "Fascinated by the idea that the Romantic imagination can reveal things hidden to the naked eye" and, assisted by the axiom that "the Romantic imagination [is] a purely political construct," Debbie Lee's *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002) unsurprisingly finds "signs of slavery in imaginative works" (1), including in Coleridge's *Rime*. Lee's critique is clearly indebted to an array of earlier historicist scholarship, including Patrick J. Keane's *Coleridge's Submerged Politics* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1994); J. R. Ebbatson, "Coleridge's Mariner and the Rights of Man," SiR 11 (1972): 171–206; Peter J. Kitson, "Coleridge, the French Revolution and the 'Ancient Mariner'," *Coleridge Bulletin* 7 (1996): 30–48; Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) 97–108.

53 See his "Lecture on the Slave-Trade," in *Lectures* 1795 *On Politics and Religion* [*LPR*], ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 231–51; a fascinating dream-vision of a post-slavery world is offered in an article of 2 April 1796, published in *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 163–65; Coleridge's entry for 25 March 1796 (no. IV), restates his principal arguments against slavery and scrutinizes arguments offered in favor of continuing the practice of slavery (*The Watchman*, 132–40); on slavery and disease, see

Coleridge's "Observations on Egypt" (6 December 1804), in *Essays on his Times*, ed. David V. Erdman (Princeton: Princeton UP), vol. 3, 200–205.

54 *Lay Sermons*, ed. J. R. White (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 30.

55 *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), vol. 2, 129; arguing that "it is impossible to isolate the pre-given, categorical element (which for sociology is schematized as 'society'—as fact or norm) from the flux of becoming," John Milbank implicitly revives Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle: "The point here is not that one never has 'unbiased' access to the social genesis, but rather that there is no pre-textual genesis: social genesis itself is an 'enacted' process of reading and writing. Curiously enough, it is much easier to talk about the 'social background' of a text when it stands relatively alone; in the mesh of intertextuality provided by a situation of rich evidence, the supposed purely social object much more evidently disappears." *Theology and Social Theory*, 105, 115.

56 For a probing discussion of anti-Slavery poetry and its many rhetorical and ideological paradoxes, see Robert Mitchell, *Sympathy and the State* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 93–120.

57 *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, 235; for another instance of Coleridge's anti-Epicurean critique of modern consumerism, see "Comparison of France with Rome" (*Morning Post*, 21 September 1802) in *Essays on his Times*, vol. 1, 315.

58 *Essays on his Times*, vol. 3, 235n.

59 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 37, 47.

60 Robert Penn Warren, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958).

61 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest for the Ordinary* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 46–50.

62 BL I: 243; Cavell readily concedes that Kant's writings were not to take their full, spectral hold on Coleridge's thought until some years later: "I am not saying that when he wrote his poem he meant it to exemplify Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, mere that it does so" (47). For an old-historicist reading at the opposite end of the critical spectrum, see William A. Ulmer, "Necessary Evils: Unitarian Theodicy in 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," which relies heavily on Coleridge's engagement with necessitarianism and determinism.

63 David Simpson, "How Marxism Reads 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'" in Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul H. Fry (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999) 156.

64 Simpson, 157; Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 10.

65 Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 49.

66 Bloom, *Agon*, 69.

67 Simpson continues to muse on the troubled cartography of the poem: "The poem refutes the rationalist cartography that made Cook's voyages possible, as it also complicates any ambition we might have to devise a rationalist theory of the emotions, or of crime and punishment (of the sort that Bentham was setting out to deduce)" (155, 157). I regard the Mariner's *disorientation* as emblematic and revealing to the reader how, in the constructed universe of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes, orientation is no longer achieved intuitively but only inferentially.

68 Perhaps the most rigorous and concise exposition of the phenomenology of *logos* and the sign is Heidegger's in *Being and Time*; there Heidegger emphasizes the "detour-character" (*Umwegigkeit*) of *logos*. What stabilizes the sign is not *prima facie* its referential purchase on external reality but its mediating structure, which

renders "visible" something that does not present itself as such." *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY P, 1996) 25; for a concise recent account of problems with representationalism, see John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1996).

69 Noting how "the criticism of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' reflects a craving for causes," Frances Ferguson rightly points out that "in Coleridge's work generally, intention and effect are absolutely discontinuous" (Ferguson, 113, 120). Indeed, her subsequent remark that the *Rime* offers "agonizing explorations of the difficulties of recognizing the full implications of an action before it is committed" (122) at least intimates that the ontological status of the Mariner's act does not really allow us to speak of intentions in the first place.

70 See note 44; in a particularly cogent analysis, Charles Taylor locates this shift in the Nominalists' "revolution against the reigning, Thomistic idea of the autonomy of nature." For Aquinas, herein on firmly Aristotelian footing, "nature seems to define for each thing its natural perfection, its proper good. This would be independent of God's will, except that he it is who has created the thing thus. But once created, it would appear that God cannot further redefine what the good is for the thing." By contrast, the Nominalists insist that "the good is what God wills" Though motivated by strictly theological considerations, this position actually precipitates the gradual process of man's emancipation from the notion of a pre-ordained framework; for if the Nominalist rejection of essences intrinsic to things "is right, then we, the dependent, created agents, have also to relate to these things not in terms of the normative patterns they reveal, but in terms of the autonomous super-purposes of our creator. The purposes things serve are extrinsic to them. The stance is fundamentally one of instrumental reason" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 97).

71 "History as Demon in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 24 (1988): 23–33, quote from 31.

72 On the imperiled, at times impoverished status of language as expressive act and as meaning, see Raimona Modiano, "Words and 'Languageless' Meanings: Limits of Expression in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," MLQ 38 (1977): 40–61, and Jerome McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 00–00; in a later essay, "Sameness or Difference? Historicist Readings of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'" in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul H. Fry (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999) offers a perceptive critique of McGann's historicist account.

73 Properly critical of the gloss and, especially, gloss-based interpretations, Frances Ferguson thus characterizes the Rime as "a mini-epic of progress that moves largely by retrogradation" (124). On the gloss in relationship to the new, "higher" biblical criticism, see McGann, 135–72. On Coleridge's idea of desynonymization, see his remark that "all languages perfect themselves by a gradual process of desynonymizing words originally equivalent, as Propriety, Property—I, Me—Mister, Master—&c/." *Notebooks* vol. 3, no. 4397; the concept is also developed in *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1: 82–84.

74 For a discussion of Hegel's conception of acknowledgment, as elaborated in the master-slave section of his *Phenomenology*, see Pinkard, Hegel's *Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 46–55; Pinkard's reading elaborates Charles Taylor's earlier account in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 148–57; more recently Taylor has further elaborated the centrality of "recognition" and "acknowledgment" within modernity's various models of selfhood, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991) 43–53.

75 For repeated, if usually dismissive references to Gnosticism in Coleridge's oeuvre, see his *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, 195–202; the remarks in that text are largely based on scholarship by his fellow Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, who offers a more comprehensive account of Gnosticism in his 1786 *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, vol. I, 139–80; Coleridge returns to Gnosticism in *Table Talk*, ed. Karl Woodring (Princeton, 1990), vol. I, 35–36 and 158–59, as well as in his parenthetical invocation of "the most cloudy gnostics" in *Opus Posthumum*, 193; like Priestley, for whom all occasional heresy by the apostles "make[s] no more than one system . . . which, in the age after the apostles, was universally called Gnosticism" (142), Coleridge also recognized Gnosticism as a theological vision largely defined by its detractors and a posteriori ("those, who were afterwards called Gnostics" [*Table Talk* I, 35]) and expressed regret over the expurgation of their writings: "I regard the extinction of all the Writings of the Gnostics among the heaviest losses of ecclesiastical Literature." *Marginalia*, ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), vol. 5, 624 (on this point, see also *Marginalia* vol. 2, 713). At times, Coleridge claims a strong intellectual kinship with Gnosis: "I solemnly bear witness and declare that every Idea, Law, or Principle in which I coincide with the Cabbala, or the School of Plotinus, or the Christian Gnostics . . . I *recognized* in them, as truths already known by me in my own meditation." *Marginalia*, vol. 4, 258–59.

76 *AR* 270–73; see also the passage just preceding: "Now should you ever find yourself in the same or in a similar state, and should attend to *the Goings-on* within you, you will learn what I mean by *originating* an act. At the same time you will see that it belongs *exclusively* to the Will (*arbitrium*); that there is nothing analogous to it in outward experiences; and that I had, therefore, no way of explaining it but by referring you to an Act of your own, and to the peculiar self-consciousness preceding and accompanying it. As we know what Life is by *Being*, so we know what Will is by *Acting*. That in *willing* . . . we *appear* to ourselves to constitute an actual beginning" (*AR* 269n).

77 *Marginalia*, vol. 2, 170–71; elsewhere, Coleridge singles out "Descartes [as] the first man who made a direct division between man and nature, the first man who made nature utterly lifeless and Godless." *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de Jackson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 565.

78 See Simmel, "The Stranger" and "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Essays on Interpretation in Social Science*, trans. Guy Oakes (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1980) 324–39.

79 "The narrative [of the *Rime*] is a symbolic formulation of the contradictions and struggles within history, and that these historical pressures are antecedent to, and indeed are the primary source of meaning behind, all plot-level representations" (24). Such reasoning fails inasmuch as it merely replaces one set of (theological) causal explanations of the type offered by Robert Penn Warren with another (historical) set; to argue that the Mariner "subtly and brilliantly co-opts the vocabulary of Christian value for the sake of undermining and redefining that value" is to ignore a vast array of extremely searching theological writings in Coleridge's oeuvre where the ontological status of human freedom, volition, and ethics is explored as a contradiction not glossed over by "Christian values" but as continually haunting Christianity since its initial theological consolidation in the period leading up to St. Augustine. The standard Marxist or social-science approach that posits the *Rime's* religious imagery and symbolism as but an ideological stalking horse for real, material contradictions or antagonisms also fails to note "that it was first of all the Church, the *sacerdotium*, rather than the *regnum*, which assumed traits of modern secularity—legal formalization, rational instrumentalization, sovereign rule, economic contractualism." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 18.

80 Hölderlin's fragment "On the Concept of Punishment" (1794) likewise stresses the non-causal and non-intentional "mysterious origin" of the ancient concept of *Nemesis*; any attempt at a causal explanation of punishment succumbs to circular argumentation; to define punishment simply as "the suffering of legitimate resistance and the consequence of evil acts" is to be driven to ex post *facto* conclusion that "evil acts, then, are those followed by punishment. And punishment follows where there are evil acts." Yet such reasoning "could never offer a self-sufficient criterion for an evil act." By contrast, "in moral consciousness . . . the moral law announces itself negatively and, as something infinite, cannot announce itself differently." Pfau, trans. and ed., *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory*, 35.

81 *Being and Time*, 176.

82 *Theology and Social Theory*, 91.

83 Arendt, 136–74.

84 Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, quoted in *LMA*, 81.

85 J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 112.