

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Evan M. Gottlieb

The Romantic period sits in a liminal historical space when radically different ideas about the categories of past, future, progress, and change coexisted in popular consciousness. The French Revolution inaugurated the concept of an Event, something that appears to come out of nowhere, and that not even the most well-informed historian could predict. In its immediate wake, we find a set of uniquely challenging, hotly contested questions: Is it still possible to predict the future from the past? Where is history going? Is it, or must it be, materially determined?

An Evental Romanticism examines the ways in which the questions about history that arose during the Romantic Era, and which find their expression in the literature and philosophy of the period, are echoed in some of the philosophical thought of our own time. It turns especially to Alain Badiou, whose primary contributions revolve around his own philosophy of the Event, which rises as strikingly against the popular determinisms of our time as the works of William Blake, Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth did in their own era. Bringing these different points of thought into constellation, *An Evental Romanticism* also draws on the work of a number of historical thinkers, both from the Romantic context and our own, including Walter Benjamin, Immanuel Kant, and Reinhart Koselleck.

It argues that there exists within the Romantic period a radical historical discourse that wrestles with the challenges of an “Evental historicism” in a way that both illuminates and is illuminated by the challenges of contemporary philosophy of history. By examining this discourse, we can understand how the Romantic poets were attempting to formulate strikingly nuanced answers, answers that may find a renewed relevance today.

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An
Evental
Romanticism

by
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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing English

Director of the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries.
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Austin Webster, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
The Past Which May Yet Come.....	1
Introduction	1
Alternate Histories	5
Counting what Counts: the Metastructures of Presentation	6
Events and History	10
Alternate Worlds and the End of World.....	13
“And in holy fire”.....	16
Reading Event(u)ally: From Blake to Shelley.....	22
Prophesying the Past - William Blake	23
<i>The Book of Urizen</i>	25
<i>America A Prophecy</i>	28
An Interlude: Klee, Friedrich, Benjamin	32
From Shadow to Shape: “The Mask of Anarchy”	34
Coda.....	38
Romanticism Against Time.....	39
Romantic Historicism.....	40
Count and Account, Presentation and Representation	43
Works Cited.....	48

KEY

BE: Being and Event

HI: Handbook of Inaesthetics

LW: Logics of Worlds

SM: Second Manifesto for Philosophy

Chapter One

The Past Which May Yet Come

Introduction

If for Percy Shelley, poets are the mirrors of futurity, then why does his most revolutionary work linger in the recent past? Why do William Blake's first prophetic works detail not a predicted future, but a series of past historical events, even if interspersed with counterfactuals? When Caspar David Friedrich paints the horizon, why does the setting sun elide with the rising sun in a liminal, atemporal twilight¹? We are used to associating the retrospective gaze of Romantic poetry with a reactionary sentimentalism, but this association is hard to square with the outspokenness of so many Romantic radicals. Accordingly, this thesis embarks on excavating a counter-discourse within Romantic historicism in opposition to the themes of nationalism, conservatism, and nostalgia that have so frequently dominated Romantic Studies under the belief that Romanticism is "characterized by the painful and melancholic conviction that in modern reality something precious has been lost" (Löwy, 21).

In establishing the field in which such a discourse would operate, it is useful to remember the contributions of the theoretical historians who have cast the wake of the French Revolution as the beginning of History. Reinhart Koselleck claims that "It was history (*Geschichte*) conceived of as a system that made possible an epic unity and established internal coherence" (30). Foucault, for his part, marks this exact period as "the mutation of Order into history" (220), which he sees as nothing less than "the fundamental mode of being of empiricities, upon the basis of which they are affirmed, posited, arranged, and distributed in the space of knowledge for the use of such disciplines or sciences as may arise" (219). The wake of the French Revolution is the genesis of a new epistemic capacity, a point where an entirely new topography of knowledge

¹ See *Frau vor untergehender Sonne*. The alternate names of the piece—*Sonnenuntergang* (sunset) *Sonnenaufgang* (sunrise)—are worth noting.

and possibility is inaugurated, one which casts the past and the future in the light of Friedrich's landscapes, where the expanse of the scene is brought together by a twilight that is morning and evening in a liminal simultaneity. Friedrich's ships as forward-facing symbols of modernity, melancholy medieval ruins, and even somber gravestones are revealed by this same eerie glow, and we might regard it as the same light by which the thinkers of history of the period saw their own new horizons. Kant's famous essay on history "An old Question Raised again" was published at the dawn of the Romantic in 1798, the same year Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, and we might find Hegel's *Lectures on The Philosophy of History*, originally given between 1822 and 1830, as a fitting counterpart to the period's twilight.

We might say there is something in the *zeitgeist*, then, and the phrase takes on a new dimension as Koselleck makes much of the fact that the period after 1870 in Germany was the dawn of *neue Zeit*, the term which would come to mark the whole period of modernity cast in a new historical consciousness (233). The English Romantic period's perpetual association with German idealism takes on a redoubled importance when we remember how many of the great German idealists were also foundational philosophers of history. The German *zeitgeist* corresponds quite literally to the English Romantic "spirit of the age." The English Romantics were conscious, as James Chandler forcefully reminds us in *England in 1819*, of their own place in history, a history that, as we learn from Koselleck and Foucault, was still in the process of being born. Moreover, this nascent historical consciousness of the period remains complicated, chaotic, self-contradictory in a way that makes it difficult to characterize broadly the plurality of political and philosophical positions attached to it, something that this thesis makes no attempt to do.

Intimately linked to the period's historical focus, we have a renewed attention to world as a philosophical category. Here we can again point to Hegel, whose *weltgeist* is worked out in the vagaries of this historical process, as the culminating link between the two. In contrast to an older Romanticist focus on the periods' idealism, abstraction, and dedication to the universal and ahistorical, it is only in recent years that critical work has rediscovered the Romantic's complex discourses as sheer *worldliness* in a return to Percy Shelley's "Everlasting universe of things" (120). What has emerged is a Romanticism that is less homogenous

but more fertile, and where instead of the ahistorical mythopoetics of natural supernaturalism, we find a vital and vitalist Romanticism which is deeply invested in questions of world, of the tensions between the material and ideal, phenomenal and noumenal, that idealism brings. As object-oriented ontology and new materialism have allowed us to once again think ontology, and as ecocriticism brings a pressing urgency to these questions, Romanticism must once again be thought of in a deeply philosophical context.

This thesis is an attempt at a superposition of these two areas of inquiry which asks two sets of questions at once: How are Romantic worlds modulated and refracted by history? And how are Romantic histories modulated and refracted by the worlds they create and are created by? To address both these points, this study argues for an Evental Romanticism that serves as counter-discourse to dominant patriotic, reactionary, and nostalgic historical visions. It examines a series of articulations buried within and traced across the period about history, the future, and the poet's relationship to both articulations that, taken together, present a schema that is unique and uncompromising in its aesthetic and political commitments. To excavate this schema, and to present it as a robust possibility that might call out to us or even demand something of us today, I turn to the philosophy of Alain Badiou, whose work creates a set of clearly articulated parallels between a mathematical ontology and the social order we inhabit. His philosophical arch-concept is that of the Event: a moment where effects occur which exceed their causes. His ontological, causal ground for this argument is built into series of specific moments in the historical field: the French Revolution, for Badiou, is a paradigmatic Event—something which links his thought diachronically with the Romantics themselves. Badiou's Event carries with it concepts of subjectivity, history, and politics that make legible something of the complexities we have been outlining in the Romantic. Most of all, it provides a possible vision for how the Romantic, which stands at the beginning Modernity, might have something to offer our present as we navigate the postmodern, which we can agree with Frederic Jameson in framing as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (1).

Badiou speaks to this impulse as well, for linked inseparably to his theory of the Event is a defense of the category of truths. For Badiou, truths are far from logical positivist or empiricist facts or certitudes. The

Badiouian truth is a formal concept, something that is always subtracted from the presentation of the world, never given positive content but always the inarticulable trace of the non-totality of a given situation.

Romanticism too has an overwhelming commitment to *truths*, which appear both in the positive (and positivist) sense of a naïve Enlightenment or Revelation, and a more interesting, negative truth that springs from aporia, from apophasis, or as Badiou might suggest, from the void. And indeed, Badiou offers a means of critical fidelity to Romanticism that is not a simple regression to naïve credulity to poetry's ahistoric, universal truths. Badiou's definition of truth cuts diagonally along the association between ahistorical truths and universal insights to suggest that Romanticism has a relationship to universal truths that are specifically historical in their emergence.

This chapter will cover this ground by examining the philosophical contours of the argument as they reverberate between Romanticism's philosophical contexts and our own, touching particularly on a shared relationship to Kant, as well as new historical awareness his philosophy participates in. In this, I enlist the aid of several major theoretical historians of modernity.

The second chapter is a set of close readings that span the start of the Romantic to its close to examine the ways in which they struggle to represent an Eventuality in their work. Particularly close attention is paid to the ways in which this representation is positioned as a political act. Blake's *Prophecies* and Shelley's "The Masque of Anarchy" are the twin literary centers of the chapter's inquiry.

The final chapter is a highly speculative fugue which engages Badiou's challenge to historicist literary criticism with Thomas Pfau's critique of New Historicist approaches to Romanticism as a set of notes towards a Badiouian criticism. Here, I put Badiou fully in conversation with Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to suggest the ways in which Badiou allows us to more fully understand Benjamin's elusive sense of the "*weak* Messianic power" with which the historian is endowed.

Alternate Histories

Hayden White argues that the fundamental philosophical motifs of the 19th century, and therefore the one by which competing historiographies are to be judged, are a fidelity to realism and a deep awareness of the complications that realism necessarily entails, making it particularly difficult to cast history as a scientific endeavor:

For, in spite of their generally “scientistic” orientation, the “realistic” aspirations of nineteenth-century thinkers and artists were informed by an awareness that any effort to understand the historical world offered special problems, difficulties not presented in the human effort to comprehend the world of merely physical processes. (45)

The problem of representing the past appears as a newly complex picture, and the competing, contradictory systems of realism that rose during the 19th century index the way that earlier Enlightenment appeals to reason and the reasonable as the sole domain of historical writing appeared increasingly suspect (White 46-47). White remarks that “every age . . . gains its integral consistency from the conviction of its own capacities to know ‘reality’ and to react to its challenges with appropriately ‘realistic’ responses” (46-47). As such, the epistemic turmoil of the Romantic represents a brief break from this unifying conviction, which re-appear in a new permutation in later German idealism, when Hegel would assert that “Reason rules the world, which means that it has ruled history as well” (28).

Against these epistemic complications of the 19th century, and against the tide of the Romantic period as a whole, we can figure the synchronic possibility of history as a scientism. A world conforming to invariant physical and natural laws can be studied according to scientific principles. The fundamental problems of history for such a scientism are *epistemic* and *representational*. How can we know or reconstruct the past from the conditions of the present, and how can it be represented by language, plot, and trope? This stability of the past is a set of ontological assumptions—most saliently that the Newtonian physics of Hume’s billiard balls scales up, through a set of locally intelligible but summatively inexplicable matrixes to the bullets, armies, and ideas which make up the representational category of “History,” at least in the popular understanding. The unyielding category of “matter” which undergirds historical materialism yields the disquieting prospect that, given maximal knowledge about a given present, sure knowledge about the past can

be produced, but such a conclusion is not limited to historical materialism. Hegel himself reminds us clearly that “This Spirit of the people is a *determinate* spirit . . . This spirit therefore constitutes the basis and the content of its self-consciousness” (55).

Against the backdrop of this historical commitment to realism and determinacy, we must consider the historical vision of the Romantic poets. Far from being an anti-realism, we can characterize the Romantic vision that this study excavates as anti-*determinant*. Categories of World or history, and most especially the nascent world-history, which present themselves as total and therefore determinant—or determinant and therefore total; these two concepts are philosophically equivalent in this context—represent a philosophical position that this Romantic gesture is interested in countering. There is a historical consciousness in Romantic art that represents not a nostalgia for a reactionary past, but a sophisticated intervention into a series of questions about world, matter, and ontology that suggest a unique historical vision that breaks both from the rational fetishism of Enlightenment historicism and the scientism of Marx or the dialectics of Hegel.

Such a vision gains a new resonance in the twilight of modernity. While physics has moved on from Newton, the physicalism that he inaugurated persists. Today, we know that subatomic particles are not billiard balls, and that sum knowledge of any given state of matter is always, necessarily, ontically incomplete. While Einstein’s relativity may have had a significant impact upon literary modernism, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem has passed much of the humanities by, and quantum physics has only made a splash with new-age pseudo-philosophy. The uneasy relationship that physics has maintained with ontology seems to demand from it some new perspectives.

Counting what Counts: the Metastructures of Presentation

From Alain Badiou, we find the startling and disturbing assertion: *there exist uncaused effects*. Badiou’s Event, the effect in excess of its cause, is a truth’s appearance in the world as the “surnumerary connection of chance and eternity” (*Second Manifesto* 81). Badiou’s systematics begin as he begins *Being and Event* with a denial of the unity of Being itself in response to the problem of the singularity of Being in the face of the

multiplicity of its presentation: “The one is not” (BE 23). In place of the One, Badiou sees only a singular operation: “there is no one, only the count-as-one” (BE 24). This operation varies according to terms of the presented multiplicity, or *situation*. Such a situation may be the field of Sociology, the current state of experimental hip-hop, or 16th-century Prussian cuisine. In all cases, the unity of the situation (as a domain in which something may take place) is always the effect of an operation (the count-as-one) that structures the *inconsistent multiplicity* of the situation prior to the count-as-one. In any situation, “the count-as-one (the structure) installs the universal pertinence of the one/multiple couple for any situation” (BE 24). From this spare, formal ground, Badiou argues that “Ontology, insofar as it exists, must necessarily be the science of the multiple qua multiple” (BE 28), that is, the science of pure multiplicity. In search of a way to speak of pure multiplicity unconstrained by the count-as-one that would designate it as such, Badiou turns to the esoterics of mathematical set theory. A detailed account of this argument is outside the scope of this thesis; we content ourselves here with the realization that any “oneness” of a situation is a false presentation over a ground of *inconsistent multiplicity*.

More germane to our interests, however, is Badiou’s re-vitalization of the Event. Badiou’s point about the unity of the count-as-one runs up against a snag:

Inconsistency as pure multiple is solely the presupposition that prior to the count the one is not. Yet what is explicit in any situation is rather that the one is. In general, a situation is not such that the thesis ‘the one is not’ can be presented therein. On the contrary, because the law is the count-as-one, nothing is presented in a situation which is not counted: the situation envelops existence with the one. Nothing is presentable in a situation otherwise than under the effect of structure, that is, under the form of the one and its composition in consistent multiplicities. (BE 52)

The false presentation of the count declares the inverse of Badiouian thesis, structuring itself that “the one is and that the pure multiple—inconsistency—is not” (BE 52). However, the count always implies a multiple which must be counted:

By consequence, since everything is counted, yet given that the one of the count, obliged to be a result, leaves a phantom remainder—of the multiple not originally being in the form of the one—one has to allow that inside the situation the pure or inconsistent multiple is both excluded from everything and thus from the presentation itself, and included, in the name of what “would be” the presentation itself, the presentation ‘in-itself’, if what the law does not

authorize to think was thinkable: that the one is not, that the being of consistency is inconsistency. (BE 53)

However, this phantom remainder is not contained in the positive content of the count: “It is quite true that prior to the count there is nothing because everything is counted” (BE 54). Instead, the count makes a positive content out of its nothing: “Its status of being results from the following: one has to admit if the one results, then ‘something’—which is not an in-situation-term, and which is thus nothing—has not been counted, this ‘something’ being that it was necessary that the operation of the count-as-one operate” (BE 55).

Badiou continues:

“What is at stake is an unrepresentable yet necessary figure which designates the gap between the result-one of presentation and that ‘on the basis of which’ there is presentation; that is, the non-term of any totality, the non-one of any count-as-one, the nothing particular to the situation, the unlocalizable void point in which it is manifest both that the situation is sutured to being and that the *that-which*-presents-itself wanders in the presentation in the form of a subtraction from the count. (BE 55)

For Badiou, any coherent presentation becomes a set of elements which always contains some element which is not a part of the coherent presentation and always links back to the void. The unity of presentation that we call “world” for Badiou is grounded in an inconsistent multiplicity which the self-presentation of the World must always deny. The count-as-one, the inconsistent self-presentation of the world, is largely cognate with the Lacanian/ Zizekian *point-de-capiton* which sutures over the incompleteness of an ideological presentation. From this point, which is the site of the inherent inconsistency of any situation, there is a great danger to the coherence of the situation: “The apparent solidity of the world of presentation is merely a result of the action of structure, even if *nothing* is outside such a result. It is necessary to prohibit that catastrophe of presentation which would be its encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency as such, or the ruin of the One” (BE 93). This inconsistency in all structure, the presentation of the void within it that would undo the count by which it is structured, is averted by a metastructure in which the count-as-one is itself. This metastructure “is literally the fictionalizing of the count via the imaginary being conferred upon it by undergoing, in turn, the operation of a count” (BE 94-95). With an appeal to a principle of set theory that he refers to as the “theorem of the point of excess,” Badiou argues for a surplus of multiples counted within

the metastructure, or state—that is *represented*—not counted within the structure of the situation itself (BE 99). These represented but unrepresented multiples are what Badiou calls “evental sites,” “*on the edge of the void*” (BE 175). This point will become especially relevant in our final chapter, where we examine the ways in which Romantic Historicism is itself engaged in the fictionalization of the first count which produces an aesthetic object.

Importantly for our more immediate purposes, moreover, Badiou identifies “situations in which at least one evental site occurs [as being] *historical*” (BE 177), in contrast to natural situations, in which all represented multiples are also presented. That is, historical situations are one in which there exist terms suspended on the edge of the void. Badiou is clear, here: “in order for there to be historicity, evental sites are necessary” (BE 176). This is the irreconcilable gap between nature and history: “Nature is too global, too normal, to open up to the evental convocation of its being. It is solely in the point of history, the representative precariousness of evental sites, that it will be revealed, via the chance of a supplement, that being-multiple inconsistencies” (BE 177).

It is in this context that Badiou philosophizes the Event. As he has already established, “The multiple on the edge of the void . . . opens up the possibility of an event” (BE 179)—but the structure is not determinant, because “The site is only ever a *condition of being* for the event.” Badiou then gives a rare specific example:

Take the syntagm ‘the French Revolution’. What should be understood by those words? One could say that the event ‘the French Revolution’ forms a one out of everything which makes up its site; that is, France between 1789 and, let’s say, 1794. [a set of examples of peoples and objects follows] The historian ends up including in the event ‘the French Revolution’ everything delivered by the epoch as traces and facts. This approach, however—which is the inventory of all the elements of the site—may well lead to the one of the event being undone to the point of being no more than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things, and words that co-existed with it. The halting point for this dissemination is the mode in which the Revolution is a central term of the Revolution itself; that is, the manner in which the conscience of the times—and the retroactive intervention of our own—filters the entire site through the one of its evental qualifications.

[. . .]

Of the French Revolution as event it must be said that it both presents the infinite multiple of the sequence of facts situated between 1789 and 1794, and, *moreover*, that it presents itself as an immanent résumé and one-mark of its own multiple. (BE 180)

Badiou's Event is marked by the "undecideability of the event's belonging to the situation" (182). This undecidability demands an interpretive gesture and response from the subject that will be further examined in chapter 3 of this thesis, but for now let us linger on what Badiou's work purports to accomplish here. The Event is the intrusion of genuine novelty into the domain of a given situation, and it is furthermore the site upon which a subject might discern truth which "bores a hole in knowledge" (BE 525). Just as for ideological theory and critique, where the site excluded from the ideological field may break into it and become a causal agent of historical progression, Badiou argues that the void intrudes into the World as the Event. However, Badiou's world does not consist in some social or representational reality, but in prediscursive ontology. Therefore, in a very real and subrepresentational sense, there exist uncaused effects: Events.

Events and History

The possibility of the Event represents a problem for the methodologies of historiography, whether 19th-century or contemporary. The rationalist attempt to reconstitute the past from conditions of the present relies on the preconception that a causal chain can be established, whether with appeal to "scientific" historical principles or the dialectic self-realization of Hegel's *weltgeist*. This is in spite of the philosophy of history that has followed after Kant: Hayden White reminds us that "Kant regarded all three modes of conceiving the historical process as equally 'fabulous' or equally 'fictive.' They represented to him evidence of the mind's capacity to impose different kinds of formal coherence on the historical process, different possibilities of its emplotment, the products of different *aesthetic* apprehensions of the historical field" (57). For Kant, the presentation of history is never a total apprehension of the past, but one that always includes an irreducible *epistemic* problem that creates room for the vagaries of *aesthetic* presentation. The acausal element in a historical account is figured as an epistemological (correlationist) gap—never as an ontic component of the past reality accounted for. For Badiou, however, "history can be naturalized, but nature cannot be historicized" (BE 176). That is, the Evental site can be "*normalized* . . . by socio-political History" (BE 176), but insofar as Events are an ontic substructure of historicity, such a normalization is always necessarily

fictional. Whereas for Kant, historicity is a problem of a partial, incomplete knowledge, Badiou's past is causally incomplete in actuality. The difference is subtle, and would be irrelevant except for Badiou's theory of the subject, which argues that the subject is constituted by recognition of, and fidelity towards, an Event which it decides has taken place. Therefore, Events can be known and recognized by the subjects which they constitute.

We find in the idea a deep homology with Walter Benjamin's philosophy. When Benjamin says that "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (247), he has grasped something fundamental: the past which is a stable and determinant cause of the future is an illusion. The immediate objection to be raised is a vulgarly Marxist defense of "objectivity," but I am reminded of Adorno's claim in *Minima Moralia*:

Anyone who, drawing on the strength of his precise reaction to a work of art, has ever subjected himself in earnest to its discipline, to its immanent formal law, the compulsion of its structure, will find that objections to the merely subjective quality of his experience vanish like a pitiful illusion: and every step that he takes, by virtue of his highly subjective innervation, towards the heart of the matter, has incomparably greater force than the comprehensive and fully backed-up analyses of such things as 'style', whose claims to scientific status are made at the expense of such experience. (69)

What Adorno says of art rings true for history, but even more important is the Evental schema of this position. The Event must be identified by and create a subject, or Adorno's "subjective innervation."

The pairing of Badiou and 19th-century historiography is not as arbitrary as it initially appears. The French Revolution inaugurated an absolute reconfiguration of the historical field that has long been identified as an Event, though not in the Badiouian sense. Koselleck notes that "the Revolution liberated a new future, whether sensed as progressive or as catastrophic, and in the same fashion a new past; the increasingly alien quality of the latter rendered it a special object of historical-critical science" (57). Koselleck suggests that "until the eighteenth century it was an almost universally accepted doctrine that one could, from the history of the past, learn lessons for the future. Knowledge of what had been and foreknowledge of what was yet to come remained connected through a quasi-natural horizon of experience, within which nothing essentially new could occur" (56). The wake of the Revolution, then, is one of an intense preoccupation with the past

and how we can apprehend it—that is, history. In that new historicism, Kant suggests a new relationship between the past and the future that supplants an older, cyclical understanding:

Therefore, an event must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race, undetermined with regard to time, and which would allow progress toward the better to be concluded as an inevitable consequence. This conclusion could also be extended to the history of the past (that it has always been in progress) in such a way that the event would have to be considered not itself as the cause of history, but only as an intimation, an historical sign (*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*) demonstrating the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety... (143)

The rupture in the historical vision that the French Revolution (as the prototype of all revolutions to come) creates is paralleled by the developing inquiry into philosophical and physical mechanisms of determinism or causality. It is no accident that we can draw very strong thematic parallels between Kant's correlationist elements of *noumena* and *phenomena* and the post-Revolution concepts of past and history. Just as the noumena remain inaccessible in and of themselves, the past recedes from full apprehension by any historical discipline, and history itself emerges as a correlation between the present and past experience. Koselleck's diagnosis is precise: "Finally, the divide between previous experience and coming expectation opened up, and the difference between past and present increased, so that lived time was experienced as a rupture, as a period of transition in which the new and unexpected continually happened" (257).

We are now in a position to recognize why, philosophically speaking, the English Romantic relationship to the French Revolution was so fraught. This Romantic historical vision celebrates the rupture into which irrupts the unforeseen and unexpected as the Kantian *signum*, or sign of the human potential for progress (Kant 143), but this radical celebration is paired with a deep nostalgia for the predictable, repeatability of historical events. Unique to the Romantics is the possibility that we find the desire for the repetition or the rupture itself and a poetics invested in the project of bringing about that repetition.

Blake's pair of prophecies (*America, a Prophecy*; *Europe, a Prophecy*) is a prime example of this. The first prophecy (1793) is a retelling of the American Revolution which ends when the "fires of Orc" are transferred from America to Europe (95). The second prophecy starts where the first left off and is thematically interested in the French Revolution and its wake. Here we find both elements of this Evental Romantic

historical vision. The poems are marked by a strange spontaneity in an utter disregard for any mechanistic sense or causality, but they are formally structured as a cycle or repetition. The spontaneous, uncaused rupture of the first poem must, once again, reappear in the second. The second chapter of this thesis will examine *America* in much greater depth, but for now, I will only note the odd temporal arrangement.

The historical structure that Koselleck presents would suggest that Blake's post-revolutionary historical vision would only be able to apprehend the history of the American Revolution as revolutionary (or for our purposes, Evental) *after* the French Revolution which inaugurated the historical consciousness in which he is participating. Indeed, a close reading of "America" leaves one with the sense that the whole poem is simply a prelude to the second poem as Orc's first stirrings are a prelude to America, suggesting that Blake himself is well aware of this paradox. It seems an injustice to Blake to consign his vision to the default historicism of modernity—that the present colors our view of, and in this sense creates, the past, etc. Instead, it more befits Blake the ardent revolutionary to function as the Kantian prophet who "himself creates and contrives the events which he announces in advance" (137). Though Kant's description is sardonic, we might imagine Blake's self-consciously naïve alternate histories as creations of an alternate present in which the revolutionary spirit might repeat in actuality. Here, we have the fullness of a Badiouian schema.

Alternate Worlds and the End of World

More than merely a means to question the contiguity of the historical world with a contemporary one from which it began to seem increasingly divorced, Romantic Eventality is a component of a deep skepticism regarding both the continuity of worlds (in historical progression) and the coherence of worlds (in themselves). When Wordsworth laments that the "world is too much with us," he signals a desire for a different world, even to be a pagan "suckled on a creed outworn" (116). "Little we see in nature that is ours," because "we have given our hearts away." Indeed, the "pagan suckled on a creed outworn" is a figure of a discontinuous past; the creed which animates him is "outworn," used up by history. Here, we have the dominant Romantic discourse of historical nostalgia, where the duality of worlds (modern and pre-industrial)

is an index of the alienation of the subject from modernity. Modern liberal parlance might shorten the sentiment slightly—"The (modern) world is *too much*"—but the sentiment is familiar. In contrast to this dominant conservative theme, the poem contains another more subversive element. The desire for a world that is not "too much with us" invokes the spectre of a world *without* us, a world of such alterity that even we ourselves have not survived the transfer. "We are out of tune" is not a dualistic metaphor in which two notes sound apart and separately, but a ternary one where the third note, which is the difference between the two primary frequencies, emerges. The sound of being "out of tune" is the experience of hearing that third frequency which is dissonant with the other two. Wordsworth's speaker here is a subject constituted in the simultaneity of two worlds, *both* of which are too much with him. Both the identification with the pre-industrial Pagan and the industrial world to which we have given our hearts seem impossible. We have left behind the pre-industrial Pagan consciousness and, in a far more radical possibility, we find a natural world which might abandon us: if "little we see in nature that is ours," we recognize the existence of a world that not only does not belong to us, but to which we do not belong either. The poem itself lingers in these two possibilities, and while the conservative gesture of the speaker is the poem's solution, it becomes clear that what is too much with us is neither the natural world nor the world of industrial modernity, but perhaps World itself: the enforced simultaneity of the two worlds in which they produce the dissonance that constitutes the speaker's alienation.

When we look to the worldliness of historical Romantic poetry, we must ask whether the world presented, and moreover presented as a presentation under the domain of the count, is contiguous with the world of the speaker, either along the horizontal axis of historical progression or the vertical one of metaphorical substitution. Blake's prophetic pasts, for example, seem to find a different world in the structure of the current one: his poems are always engaged in endless retellings—of history, of the Bible, of creation. But though these worlds are figured as different and distinct, they are not *maximally* distinct, and their relationship to the world of the poet is complicated. Moreover, Blake's worlds are markedly different from our world, not just in content but in form. Blake's prophetic worlds are spectacularly acausal, with actions

occurring across timeframes, with distributed causes and causeless effects. It is useful, at least momentarily, to ignore generic considerations and to think of Blake's prophetic worlds as precursors to what Quentin Meillassoux has called "Extro-science fiction:"

Extro-science fiction thus defines a particular regime of the imaginary in which structured—or rather destructured—worlds are conceived in such a way that experimental science cannot deploy its theories or constitute its objects within them. The guiding question of extro-science fiction is: what should a world be, what should a world resemble, so that it is in principle inaccessible to a scientific knowledge, so that it cannot be established as the object of a natural science? (6)

Meillassoux is using "world" in the same Kantian sense this thesis does, as the set of natural scientific laws and principles that ground our interpretation of reality and maintain a consistent ground for our experience. Meillassoux contends that science fiction, no matter how fantastical its elements, maintains an implicitly consistent World—in short, everything which happens has a rational scientific explanation: things which appear miraculous are always due to misunderstandings or the limitations of our scientific knowledge, never to an acausal variation in the laws that govern our universe. Even if, for example, a *Star Trek* episode may feature an anomaly in a gravitational field, that anomaly is either explained or consigned to future scientific inquiry. Extro-science fiction, on the other hand, is the imagining of a world in which Hume's billiard balls can indeed veer off course without cause. And indeed, Meillassoux's sustained example is Asimov's "The Billiard Ball."

Extro-science fiction is therefore fiction that allows the explicitly miraculous to such a degree that scientific epistemologies break down. The rupture, however, is not within the field of epistemology. The reactionary gesture in response would be something along the lines of "there are more things on heaven and earth," implying that it is the subject who lacks a specific knowledge about the complexities of a stable natural order. Instead, this is an *ontic* acausality. Indeed, the split between science fiction and extro-science fiction is apparent when we attempt to imagine a *Star Trek* episode where gravity ceases to function and the crew eventually concludes the anomaly as inexplicable—and will forever be so, no matter how closely the anomaly is studied or observed. This is the jump to extro-science fiction. It is also the shattering of World, at least when understood as a complete and unified totality.

Here we can easily see the connection with the rest of Meillassoux's philosophy, which suggests that, perhaps, the strange world of XSF is in fact the very world we inhabit day-to-day without realizing it. His work in *After Finitude* is an attempt to argue for what he has come to call hyperchaos, the "presence of an absolute and menacing power - something insensible and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything, or of realizing every dream, but also every nightmare..." (*After Finitude* 64). Through Meillassoux, and through his break in the concept of world by the introduction of hyperchaos, we can trace the echo of his mentor, Badiou. For Badiou's Event is a similar end of World in its spectacular acausality, which hangs "on the edge of the void" (*BE* 175).

The ontological strangeness, or hyperchaos, of the world of extro-science fiction creates an epistemological crisis for science within the text. For our Romantic vision, we see a similar relationship, but reversed: a crisis in the epistemologies of historicism indexes the possibility of an ontological weirdness—one now suppressed, but almost visible to a Romantic vision on the cusp of modernity, and which is reappearing to us in its twilight.

"And in holy fire"

The problem becomes one of poetics: how to *represent* the ontologically *singular*. For although Events are necessarily singular, the re-presentation of the Event within a historical narrative, in effect, becomes a Badiouian count-as-one, incorporating it within a narrative coherence cognate with a total and determined world. The problem here is quite subtle, recalling Badiou's account of the historian who undoes the Event under the expository narration of simultaneous occurrences (*BE* 180). As Badiou clarifies elsewhere "The event adds itself onto what there is, but as soon as this supplement is pointed out, the "there is" reclaims its rights, laying hold of everything (*HI* 61). How does poetry respond to the event without reinscribing it into the "there is"

First, as Hume reminds us, "It is universally acknowledged that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that 'chance,' when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power

(48).” The grammar of the passive “it happened” would imply an ignorance, or at worst a deliberate obfuscation of a cause. The very grammar of a narrative history is always ill at ease with the irruption of the Event. Similarly, it is useful to bring up Lacan’s remarks on the *point de capiton* as that “The diachronic function of this button tie [*point de capiton*] can be found in a sentence, insofar as a sentence closes its signification only with the last term, each term being anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms and, inversely, sealing [*scellant*] their meaning by its retroactive effect” (682). The function of “sealing” here evokes both the fixed, closed, immutable nature of the narrative, but also the finalization of the narrative that creates a totalized whole, “For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it” (419). Lacan’s point suggests that any straightforward presentation of an historical narrative will end up conditioning the prior of the Event to imply the *necessity* of the Event to come. Inevitably, the Kantian *signum* becomes the master signifier and *point de capiton* towards which all prior events pointed and upon which their meaning was deferred. The Event represents a possibility that runs counter to the function of language itself. Walter Benjamin addresses both of these problems in his “Theses”:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with the chips of Messianic time. (255)

In this solution we can identify the scheme of Evental Romanticism: in its spontaneity and acausality, it invokes an apocalypse that is not just the end of *the* world, but the end of World itself. In linking this vision to a history, particularly a local temporal context, this end of World becomes immanent in the historical fabric of Romantic Modernity. And most importantly, the Romantic vision inextricably links the poet to this Event, figuring the literary representation of this rupture as engendering the repetition of it, which is the fundamental Romantic wager. But if Badiou figures the Event as the irruption of the void into the situation in such a way as to reveal its potential non-totality, how is the non-totality of the world represented in the

aesthetic totality of the poem? And, if such a task can be accomplished, is the inherent politics of the Romantic wager one worth recuperating? Can it survive and speak to us today?

In one of Romanticism's most paradigmatic apophatic moments, in "Hymns to the Night," Novalis asks, "Don't the night's colours contain all that inspires us?" (23). And indeed, Romanticism has always been sustained by the negative, by the ironic, the apophatic; but rather than celebrating such elements in Romantic poetry as its core—in the case of Novalis, its self-professed core—modern Marxist and historically inflected criticism has tended to be critical of attempts to read Romanticism as offering a political cause more radical than the bourgeois aesthetics and ahistorical sentimentality from which it arguably sprang. When McGann says that "The displacement efforts of Romantic poetry, its escape trails and pursued states of harmony and reconciliation—ultimately, its desire for process and self-reproduction ('something evermore about to be')—are that age's dominant cultural illusions which Romantic poetry assumes only to weigh them out and find them wanting" (133), he mistakes the positive content of the Romantic vision as its center, instead of recognizing that the true (and as I will argue in this thesis' final chapter, self-aware) center of this Romantic vision is the negative, indeterminate void around which it orbits, the void from which springs the Event. This thesis focuses on the Eventuality of Romantic poetry itself rather than considering it as orbiting a specific historical Event, but it must be emphasized that the Romantic Event is always imminently historic, whether it be the American Revolution, the French Revolution, Peterloo, the many slave rebellions of the period, or some unknown Event waiting on Shelley or Friedrich's horizons.

Instead, the Romantic writing that this thesis examines is conditioned by—but un beholden to—the supremacy of this *signum*, choosing instead to figure it as a negative space, an aporia that lingers rather than a factual break from the past. The signum/Event emerges as the difference between Romantic alternate histories and the dominant or factual histories. And it is this difference, actually, that both vitiates and redeems McGann's point about Romanticism's ideological entanglements. McGann suggests:

The field of history, politics, and social relations is everywhere marked in the Romantic period by complex divisions and conflicts previously unprecedented in Europe. Romantic poetry develops an argument that such dislocations can only be resolved beyond the realm of immediate experience, at the level of the mind's idea or the heart's desire. The Romantic

position—it is an historically limited and determinant one—is that the poet operates at such levels of reality, and hence that poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiences of this time and place. (69)

If these be the essential characteristics of the Romantic ideology, Badiou sits as an arch-Romantic, but to dismiss him as such would be to dismiss the deep political investments of his philosophy. And indeed, Badiou's insistence on his own materialism (*SM* 12) and his own revival of the "materialist dialectic" (*LW* 3), suggest a commonality that complicates any attempt to position Badiou as a total opponent or foil to the Marxist tradition that McGann situates himself. Badiou *does* sit within this same Marxist tradition, and we must not forget his point that Events are rare, and the irruptions of indeterminism that they represent are fleeting. But while he distances himself from the theoretical apparatus of orthodox Marxism, he does it in a different manner than the paradigm of New Historicism. If McGann identifies Romantic poetry as a capitulation to the ideological illusion that poetry can escape the vagaries of history, Badiou's far more radical thesis might be that the poet can become a poet of the Event (a faithful subject) at the site of history's own escape from itself.

In appealing to Badiou my own divergence from the trajectory of contemporary Marxist criticism is grudging, and less complete than it might seem. In my third chapter, I give an account of Romantic failure, and while I locate it in a different place than McGann or the general attitude of New Historicism, this project is less than a total, naïve recuperation of Romantic poetry for the political cause. I merely suggest alternatives to casting Romanticism's idealist sublime as the apotheosis of ideology, and only celebrating its failures and ironies as divergences and unconscious departures from a determinant ideology.

Historically conscious Romanticism occupies the juncture between a liberative hope in indeterminism and contingency, and resignation to a narrative inability to account for/of a recent past. Instead, there exists a Romantic historic vision that finds hope in the indeterminism of history by indexing its Evental status by conjuring false pasts, or alternate pasts. The presentation of the Event within a narrative chain as a positive concept becomes impossible, precluded by the structure of language itself. As such, that which is prior to the Event is necessarily inaccessible as such, and any historical account, which is necessarily dependent on an assumed determinism, is dependent on the same (inadequate) gesture as prophecy—hence

the way that Blake's history-facing poems are the ones most explicitly declared as prophecies. Here, Ian Balfour's note in *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* that prophecy is paradoxical—para-doxa—is helpful. He establishes that the point of prophecy is to run “counter to the dominant belief” (2), in this case the dogmatics of received, narrative History in Koselleck's sense of *Geschichte* (28-29). While Balfour reads Benjamin to suggest that “The paradoxical task of politics, then, as of history generally, is to prophesy the present” (16), I wish to re-assert the importance of this para-doxality in the domain of the past, and linger in the ways that the past is represented not only in service of the present, but in the service of both that past itself and the future. We will address these points in detail in the following chapters, but for now it is important to establish that past-prophecy is always contrasted to the received history, and its methodology is necessarily different.

Romantic prophetic pasts fall into the domain of the “might yet have been,” serving to reinforce the contingency, or openness, of the future by finding that openness in the past. This performs a double function. Firstly, it insists on a historic Event itself through aporetic and negative narrative and semantic structures that conjure it from the difference between the alternative past of the poem and the givenness of a factual (and deterministic) history. Though I follow traditional Romanticist criticism by identifying this Event with the French Revolution, I argue that the specificity of this first function is often sublated into the second function, which is to insist on Eventality itself. These negative spaces from which spring the spectres of the Event are evocative both of Badiou's void, which is always the site of the Event, and Benjamin's Messianic history, where “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (255). Most of all, these alternate pasts become a Badiouian fidelity to an Event, noting its intrusion into the world, and orienting the poet-figure as a *faithful* subject of the Event by a procedure of *speculative virtual retro-causality*, the creation of history for a future yet to come but which may arrive at any moment. This is a poetics of unapprehended inspiration, where the poet is figured as a hierophant of an anticipated Event.

To what end is this vision excavated? This work holds that the Romantic was situated within a philosophical and political moment that is doubled in our own, that the worlds that it invokes haunt our own

as spectres, and that the historical vision on which it depends, simply put, is worth excavating for our political moment. The loose (and problematic) association of figures that make up Speculative Realism have been engaged in thinking about causality and time through and after Kant and Hume, updating it for the weird realities of the 21st century. The terms that made up the default, culturally assumed causality—matter, cause, effect, time, determinism, necessity—have been thoroughly complicated by recent developments, whether in particle physics, where indeterminism and acausality are inscribed into the mathematics of the system, or in philosophy, where figures like Markus Gabriel have boldly and persuasively insisted that the World does not exist. It is in terms of these general complications that I figure Badiou as among the Speculative Realists, though his fundamental work generally predates the movement. These philosophical concerns have arisen at what is perhaps the twilight of modernity, and, as Friedrich's paintings so exquisitely remind us, the twilight elides with the dawn.

Chapter 2

Reading Event(u)ally: From Blake to Shelley

When Jerome McGann writes in 1983 that “Romantic poetry is poetry of ideas, of Ideals, and—ultimately—of Ideology, which is why displacements and illusions are its central preoccupations and resorts,” and that “Consequently, its greatest moments of artistic success are almost always those associated with loss, failure, and defeat—in particular the losses which strike most closely to the Ideals (and Ideologies) cherished by the poets in their work” (134), he succinctly registers the inability of a Marxist-inflected criticism to understand fully a Romantic politics while implicitly demonstrating why it *must* do so. My previous chapter established the case for reading the Romantics through Alain Badiou to understand Romantic loss, failure, and defeat as subtractions from the presentation of an ideological frame. That is, Badiou’s model of truth processes illuminates the positive dimension of the failure of “Ideals” in Romantic poetry: these subtractions from the present order become the windows by which new political truth may enter. Similarly, this chapter looks to Romantic prophecies of alternate pasts to see them as subtractions from a totalizing present determined by an immutable past. This move recasts the self-defeating, or at least self-negating, Romanticism described by McGann and others as a political and artistic *fidelity*, Badiou’s term for the orientation of the subject who “claims that an event, interrupting the ordinary logic of facts, has taken place” (Besana 324). This fidelity is to the openness of the future, for Badiou fundamentally argues for *Events*, effects which exceed their causes. With Badiou’s help, we can avoid the trap of McGann’s “Romantic ideology” while nevertheless taking these Romantic productions seriously, because such a correspondence reveals Romantic politico-historiography as rigorous revolutionary commitment rather than aesthetically and ideologically bound naïveté. This chapter’s work is both to examine a philosophically inflected poetics of the Event and to establish the Romantic figure who identifies and decides on this Event, thereby becoming a Badiouian

“faithful subject,” in order to excavate a politics of Romantic poetry previously illegible to contemporary criticism.

I place William Blake’s prophecies at the beginning of this arc based on the malleability of his histories, which become strangely permeable to the genre of prophecy. Thereafter, I move to readings of Shelley, focusing primarily on “The Mask of Anarchy” and “A Defence of Poetry.” I trace Shelley’s motif of the shape or the spectre as a particularly well-developed sense of the Event at the core of Shelley’s political and poetic commitments. I develop this argument from Blake to Shelley to suggest *Eventality* as a constitutive element of what we call Romanticism.

Propheying the Past - William Blake

I first examine Blake’s *The First Book of Urizen* to excavate Blake’s ontology before turning to *America a Prophecy* to find an Evental history. Above both of these readings hangs the specter of Blake’s own *The Ancient of Days*, the hunched-over figure of Urizen demarcating the sphere of the world. The primary gesture of both readings is to map Urizen’s encompassing of the world onto what Badiou calls the “count-as-one,” the self-presentation of a situation, or the meta-ontological result of ontological operations: “Given the non-being of the One, any one-effect is the result of an operation, the count-as-one. Every situation ... is structured by such a count” (BE 504). For Badiou, this count obscures the fundamental multiplicity of the world in a way that is best understood in its ideological implications: any stable and self-consistent order of things is not a representation of the Real, but only a circumscription ordained by societal power. Blake’s visceral opposition to the Urizenic encircling with Newton’s compass becomes cognate to Badiou’s thesis that “The one *is not*” (BE 23), layering an insistence on the fundamental multiplicity of the world into both texts.

I am indebted to Ian Baucom, in whose *Specters of the Atlantic* I first found the constellation of Kant, Benjamin, and Badiou that informs so much of my project. Baucom puts Kant’s “An Old Question Raised Again: Is The Human Race Constantly Progressing?” into conversation with Benjamin. In Kant’s attempt to

answer this question, he starts by expressing a desire for a “history . . . drawn not from past but future time, therefore a predictive history” (137), which he associates with the concept of prophecy in the naïve sense that Ian Balfour has identified as “a reductive violence that . . . marks as well most Christian discourse on prophecy through the eighteenth century” (6). However, Kant immediately complicates this desire by suggesting a mode of prophecy wherein the prophet inaugurates the events he predicts: “But how is a history a priori possible? — Answer: if the diviner himself *makes* and contrives the events which he announces in advance” (137). This, for Kant, is the only option to divine a future otherwise inaccessible, and here he is pointing to the impossibility of the previous naïve desires. In the fourth meditation of the essay, Kant suggests that any prediction of the future is foreclosed by free will. Instead, he finds the prophetic gesture grounded in the past:

. . . an event as an effect can be predicted [only] if the circumstances prevail which contribute to it. That these conditions must come to pass some time or other can, of course, be predicted in general, as in the calculation of probability in games of chance; but that prediction cannot enable us to know whether what is predicted is to happen in my life and I am to have the experience of it. —Therefore, an occurrence must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race . . . This conclusion then could also be extended to the history of the past (that it has always been in progress) in such a way that that occurrence would have to be considered not itself as the cause of history, but only as an intimation, a historical sign (*signum rememorativum*, *demonstrativum*, *prognostikon*) demonstrating the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety... (142-143)

Baucom identifies this as “Kant’s proleptic Benjaminian turn” whereby his perspective shifts backwards towards the past, but Baucom notes the attempt to disavow this apparent contradiction by “troping his turn to the ‘history of the past’ as an ‘extension’ rather than a reversal of this forward-looking gaze” (114-115). It is this apparent contradiction in looking at the future through the past that opens us into thinking the Event, for Kant’s *signum rememorativum*, *demonstrativum*, *prognostikon*, if identified, is a guarantor of *possibility*, not a causal certainty.

The Book of Urizen

Blake's *Urizen* retells Genesis through Blake's own heterodox mythology. Urizen is a demiurge, a creator figure who gives the earth form but also cuts it off from eternity. The book is a complex intervention in both contemporaneous philosophy and theology, but my reading is primarily interested in abstracting Blake's philosophical account from his religious polemic. As we do this, we find that Blake's figure of Urizen, that "shadow of horror ... risen In Eternity" (3.1-2), gives us a startlingly Badiouian vision of ontology. After a brief prelude that figures the "Eternals" as muses, the first chapter has Urizen depart from these eternals in order to rule over his own domain as he creates it *ex nihilo*:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific?
Self-closed, all-repelling; what Demon
Hath form'd this abominable void
This soul-shudd'ring vacuum? Some said
"It is Urizen," But unknown, abstracted
Brooding secret, the dark power hid.

Times on times he divided, & measur'd
Space by space in his ninefold darkness. (3.1-9)

Amanda Goldstein reads this as an image of "the uniquely 'Self-closed' causal circuit of organicist self-generation" (50) whereby Urizen becomes a figure of the "Kantian organic form—as form 'without recourse to extraneous causes'" (49). For her, Urizen becomes a figure of life only by subtracting himself from another form of life: "*The Book of Urizen* reveals Urizen's heroic form of Romantic autonomy ... to have been generated at high cost. The 'vacuum' in which this act transpires was once an inhabited space . . ." (51). While I appreciate Goldstein's careful argument, it is important to take seriously Urizen's creation of space itself prior to his creation of life. The Urizenic creation begins in darkness, and Blake lingers as "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*KJV* Gen 1:1). Here, I'm reminded of Tilottama Rajan's suggestion that "the Eternals provide no viable alternative to Urizen" (265) and that the cosmos "was never sufficient to have stood or free to fall" (262). That is, Urizen's later description as "self-balanc'd stretch'd o'er the void" (116) is not so much the description of individualized vitalist life Goldstein argues, but an ontological necessity. Blake's scattered

imagery in the first chapter—of “vast forests,” “petrific abominable chaos,” and “The dread world, & rolling of wheels” (3.30)—suggests a chaotic world unbound by material form struggling against primordial chaos.

Accordingly, any account of Urizen as primarily a parody of vitalist individualism is unable to account for Urizen as demiurge. In the beginning, moreover, Urizen is not figured against other life, but against “A void immense” (4.16). This is cognate to the Badiouian account of being, where “In effect, if all apparent unity is in effect a multiplicity of multiplicities, and is so without assignable end, then we ultimately end at the void” (Tarby 26). Understood in this context, Urizen’s division “Times on Times” is not an affirmation of the multiple (“The one is not”), but rather an insistence on an account of totality. One is reminded that Urizen divides and measures with the compass of Newton, who inaugurated a mathematics that allowed (de)finite answers to problems wrapped up in the infinite (or infinitesimal). To measure the instantaneous rate of change of an arc via calculus meant that one no longer had to approach the concept of infinity directly—which in the 18th century was still laden with implications of the Absolute—by ever closer approximations. One could now, so to speak, wrest the problem from infinity, and as Blake says in our next poem, “Earth had lost another portion of the infinite” (*America* 64/14.18). Similarly, this division “times on times” becomes an image of the atomic logic of a burgeoning rationalism founded in the belief that somewhere, in the subparticles of subparticles, there might be a logic that accounts for the totality of the world. This is what Graham Harman calls “undermining:” to take a thing and “explain it in terms of its smaller constituents, by way of a downward reduction” (8). Blake’s repudiation of Urizen condemns this undermining.

Urizen continues to create his world, which despite containing “vast forests,” has not yet coalesced into the Euclidean geometry of the earth (“Earth was not”) and remains a “petrific abominable chaos” (3.36, 3.26). The poem’s distinction between world and earth here indexes its philosophical distinctions. After creating the world in darkness, Urizen becomes “That solitary one in Immensity” who masters and then incorporates the elements into his world:

First I fought with the fire; consum’d
Inwards, into a deep world within;

A void immense, wild dark & deep
 Where nothing was: Nature's wide womb
 And self balanc'd stretch'd o'er the void
 I alone, even I! ... (4.14-19)

Urizen, the count-as-one, is “stretch’d,” “self balanc’d” over the void that is the name of multiplicities of multiplicities. Instead of being a negative site of pure absence, Blake’s void, like Badiou’s, is “the name of being qua being” (Fraser 377). We must remember that, for Badiou, “every unity is a unity *of* something which is not *in itself* unitary” (Fraser 377). That is, Urizen’s function, or Badiouian *operation*, poetically and ontologically, as the count-as-one—think how he declares himself “I alone, even I,”—is always suspended, “self balanc’d” over the void of sheer multiplicity that must exist *a priori* to the insistence on one-ness and retains a sense of absolute potentiality, the “void ... where nothing was: Nature’s wide womb.” Urizen declares himself *ex nihilo* by the process of division times upon times, the calculus whereby he becomes a finite value wrested from infinity/ multiplicity.

As the poem progresses, Urizen does battle with the “shapes Bred from his forsaken wilderness.” He then builds an encircling barrier between himself and eternity:

And a roof vast petrific around
 On all sides He fram’d: like a womb;
 [...]
 Like a human heart struggling & beating
 The vast world of Urizen appear’d. (5.28-37)

We can read a parallel between this encircling of the world and Urizen’s own death and binding. As Urizen encircles the earth, he cuts himself off from eternity, dying and becoming a “clod of clay” before being bound and riveted by his associate, Los (6.1-10.43). Here, the logic of the plot becomes confused. Though there’s an obvious structural parallel—Urizen is bound by brass just like the binding laws of his brass book—as a character Los has little motive justification, so we need to inquire into the structure of the plot itself. Rajan points out that “It is as if the plot is a machine with its own logic: an empty logic in which actants are automatically transferred from function to function so as to abort the purpose of their previous function” (267). That is, our inability to identify Los and Urizen as genuine characters is a function of the logic of the plot, which moves forward with a sort of inexorability that seems to suggest nothing could be otherwise.

Rather than reading the later sections' causally confused series of bindings and divisions as a schema whereby characters and actions represent specific ontological strata, we must recognize that Blake's plot is attempting something different. Rajan goes on to say that "The process by which the text (de)constructs characters to explain and complete itself renders cosmic history as a series of rifts and permutations profoundly resistant to humanistic reading" (268). We cannot get lost in reading practices of identification or recognition, because Blake's text forecloses these very possibilities in favor of a type of self-referential formal experiment that abjures identificatory understanding. Blake's formal procedures here—division, subtraction, encircling, and obscuring—are less procedures of narrative than they are an attempt to argue with a language of Urizenic/Newtonian rationalism without ceding it any ground.

In Badiou's formal definition, "A truth is both infinite and generic" (LW 34). Blake's particularities of character and plot are beside the point of the philosophical system that he is laying out—one that we have registered as markedly Badiouian. *The First Book of Urizen*'s insistence on the negation of character and plot leaves us with a spare, formal mythic where questions of Event surface more clearly. How does historicism avoid Urizen's encompassing? If we are to look to the past for the Kantian *signum prognostikon*, how are we to find the future it proclaims as anything other than always already encircled, self-contained? We are looking for something which is "not itself as the cause of history, but only as an intimation, an historical sign" (Kant 143), but such a sign must not be determinative. We are looking for a philosophy of the Event.

America A Prophecy

America a Prophecy is structured as an ostensible re-telling of the American Revolution by de-priveleging the material events in favor of Blake's mythic entities and forces—the confrontation between Urizen, associated with British oppression, and Orc, figure of fiery rebellion. As Balfour suggests, Blake's two overtly prophetic books rely on the repetition of historical structures of revolution:

The difference in time between the two Revolutions [American and French] allows for the American revolution to function as the prefiguration of the French and thus it is prophetic in the most common sense of the word. The American Revolution, for Blake writing in

1793, is of more than 'historical' interest because it becomes the paradigm of the revolution, the model for future revolutions. (138-139)

In the poem, after his victory over Britain's Urizenic forces, Orc's red light *is* passed on to France, which will repeat the spirit of the American revolution. It is tempting to think this in the Kantian schema, without the need for a Badiouian Event, such that Blake prophecies by finding Kant's *signum* in the past as a guarantor of future redemption—the inevitable triumph of Orc over Urizen. This would become a perennialism where history is merely the reflection of cyclical mythic events. While correct in outline, however, such a reading ignores a fundamental feature of the text: the central “rush together,” which is unexplained by either mythic or material antecedent.

In *America a Prophecy*, Blake's vertiginous leaps between atomic historical referents (figures, places, names) and the mythical superstructure (Orc, Albion) make it difficult to read the poem as history. Indeed, Saree Makdisi claims that Blake's *America* refuses to participate in a dominant narrative of history by attempting “to blast a hole in what the radicals (and generations of scholars since them) understand to be a continuous and progressive history” (156). Makdisi's claim suggests that Blake, rather than participating in the dominant narrative of historical progression, sees his project as fundamentally opposed. Thus, Urizen's compass is wielded not only by reactionaries but also by the radical project in which Kant himself was implicated. In Blake, we need to read something beyond both alternatives. Narratives of history themselves are dominated by the encircling and endless divisions of the clock-face. Makdisi identifies Blake's response as poetry focused on the moment:

Even if “eternity is in love with the productions of time,” time for Blake has no way to acknowledge either the existence of eternity or the uniqueness of the moments by which eternity is continuously constituted, an ever-changing constellation of interlocking, overlapping, sometimes complementary, and often contradictory moments. If “the hours of folly are measur'd by the clock,” no clock can measure “wisdom” because the unmeasurable, unquantifiable, moment, and eternity itself—rather than the stream of empty time—are according to Blake the provenance of wisdom and prophecy. (156)

In other words, we should recognize that the domain of Blakean prophecy exceeds both the realms of history and progress. Accordingly, when England's representative figure, Albion, calls down plague and pestilence at

the poem's climax, we must remember to read it not as a mythologized history, but as something working to destabilize that history:

Fury! rage! Madness! in a wind swept through America
 And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce around
 The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th' inhabitants together;
 The citizens of New-York close their books & and lock their chests;
 The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;
 The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;
 The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.

Then had America Been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,
 And Earth had lost another portion of the infinite.
 But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire.
 The red fires rag'd! the plagues recoil'd! Then rolld they back with fury (16/14.10-20)

Here, the Norton edition helpfully points out that this despair of these figures (Franklin and Washington) has no visible historical referent. We can fully see materiality made subservient to the "armies drawn out in the sky" (93), and Blake's luminaries are made aware of the true threat; but for their efforts, "Earth had lost another portion of the infinite." The battle itself, the turning point in the revolution, is strangely occulted, buried under a line that evokes nothing but itself: "But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire." This central aporia is where the rest of the poem becomes retroactively prophetic. There is nothing within the situation that engenders the sudden reversal, the reason why the plagues recoil'd.

Here we find Badiou's hallmark of the Event: its undecidability as to whether it is part of the situation. As he says in *BE*, "The paradox of an evental-site is that it can only be recognized on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it is presented" (192). In *America*, the point where "But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire," which is the causal link for the changing tide of the battle, likewise "marks the elemental existence of that which the situation does not present" (Bartlett 315). The grammar of Blake's line invokes this meaning: the conjunction "but" slips between the coordinating ("but also") and subordinating ("excepting") functions, where the next clause ("The red fires rag'd!") is in the present tense. This brief line in the present marks the Evental possibility of the "rush together": to read it as coordinating (and thereby discount the present tense of the following clause), is to decide on the "rush together" as a portion in the narrative of the poem—as belonging to the situation. But it only reveals the

presence of the void within the situation. But this conjunction can also be read as subordinating, in which case the “rush together” is undetermined by the historical situation and thus exists outside it, serving again as a reminder of the void. This is Badiou’s “double function,” the revelation that both possibilities route back to the void, that “incandescent non-being of an existence” (BE 183).

The *Eventuality* of the rushing together—in more concrete terms, Blake’s rendering the American Revolution as something that simultaneously partakes of its historical moment and utterly exceeds it—inaugurates the *eventuality* of the poem and allows it to enter into the prophetic. At this point, the mythopoeic seems to detach more, but not entirely, from its historical backdrop. As the fires of Orc overtake Albion’s plagues, the *genii loci* of Britain become infected by Albion’s own plagues:

Across the limbs of Albion’s Guardian, the spotted plague smote Bristol’s
And the Leprosy London’s Spirit, sickening all their bands:
The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammerd mail,
And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude (17/15.2-5)

In the next stanza, the plagues are “Driven o’er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland and Wales” (94). This bitter defeat of the British spirit ushers in an age of sexual liberation:

The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests in rustling scales
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of fierce desire
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth, (17/15.19-22)

These effects are inaugurated by the turning of the battle that hinges upon the “rush together.” However, the continual variations in tense between past and present lend an instability to this present. It may or may not be, simultaneously, depending on the Evental status of the “rush together.” When the poem ends with Urizen “Hiding the Demon red with clouds & cold mists from the earth; / Till Angels & weak men twelve years should govern o-er the strong; / And then their light should come, when France reciev’d the Demon’s light,” we are able finally to see the stakes of this prophecy (18/16.13-15). Should the Event of the American Revolution be decided upon, then the French Revolution can actualize its potential. Here, we see the relevance of Benjamin’s “memory ... as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (247). To seize this past in the poem—to make the illocutionary act of deciding on the undecidable—is to insist on a future present that

retroactively redeems such a past. To insist on the Event of the American Revolution is to insist on a future that can find that Event as an antecedent. Moreover, it is to insist that the *a priori* of the Event as History is equally dependent upon it, recast as shadows of that futurity. The “Sullen fires across the Atlantic” that “glow to America’s shore” and “Pierc[e] the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent night” (5/3.2-3), then become those same fires that rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire. Blake’s prophecy is a fidelity to the Event of the American Revolution in order to “seize a memory” that might repeat in the French Republic. Hence, Blake’s insistence on this alternate past is an awareness that the past, after an Event, is ideologically reconstituted to express the conditions of the coming-to-be of that same Event.

An Interlude: Klee, Friedrich, Benjamin

The figure of the Romantic poet who, through his poetry, can take control of a memory—“the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 247)—is central to my argument about the Romantic poetics of the Event. Whereas the argument of this chapter is primarily that we can read the politics of Romantic poetry as anachronistically Badiouian, we have not addressed extent to which these same poets saw *themselves* as engaged in this type of activity as faithful subjects of the Event.

To highlight this figure, rather than return to Benjamin’s figuration of Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, the historical vision of the Romantic might better be represented by Caspar David



Friedrich's paradigmatic *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* (1818). Instead of the angel turned towards the past, the observer is transfixed above the moiling sea in front of him. The future is yet-unapprehended inspiration, which, like the sea of fog, is in danger of overwhelming the transfixed poet. Friedrich's sea here is only a sea insofar as the wanderer is positioned over it, occulting the central portion of the painting which might forbid the possibility of seeing it as a sea at all. The possibility of this sea/fog duality (*nebelmeer*) imparts a radically different sense of motion depending on one's interpretation. As fog, banks seem to be rolling by laterally, angles canted to the right, as little more than ephemera passing across the wanderer's vision, which is fixed on the cynosure of angles in the distant horizon. As sea, however, the Wanderer is in sublime danger: the horizon lowers, and the distant sloping hills that divide the painting vertically become the clouds hovering over a distant horizon as the sea crashes around the coastal rocks in front of him. In this view, the scene becomes a storm that could overwhelm the figure at any moment. Moreover, the Wanderer himself blots out the central point of painting that would complete the picture and give us a directionality for the movement and angles. Instead, even as he oversees the whole scene, his positioning in the foreground obstructs *our* ability to see what he sees; the Wanderer's striking black clothing thus creates a tear or hole in the total picture, which becomes practically unavailable. Finally, the painting's German title, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, leads us back to Badiou: *über* suggests both the positional sense of "over," but also the sense of "in excess of," thereby echoing the abovementioned Badiouian paradox whereby the void that harbors the Event's potential is always simultaneously part of and apart from the situation it structures.

I propose, then, that Friedrich's Wanderer is another version of the Romantic poet—in particular, Shelley's vision of the poet as hierophant. Poets, Shelley tells us, are the "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" (*A Defence* 701). Like the fog/ sea of Friedrich's painting, the geometry of Shelley's image seems tangled and confused. Further, Shelley asserts that "The person in whom this power resides, may often ... have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers" (701). As in Friedrich's painting, in other words, Shelley's poet is located neither determinately in the situation nor outside of it. His poet is not a conventional mirror, but an inverse mirror

which reflects not the positive images of futurity but their shadows into the present. But there is yet another complication here: conspicuously, shadows *cannot be reflected* in mirrors. Yet it's precisely such shadows—the absences in the image of futurity which are reflected into the world by the poet, who thereby becomes the “unplaceable point which shows that the that-which-presents wanders throughout the presentation in the form of a subtraction from the count” (BE 526). Rather than providing an image of the future that is whole and thus immutable, the poet casts back the shadows, or incomplete, portions of the image. By reflecting the shadows of futurity, the parts of the vision which lack substantive content, the poet becomes the Badiouian subject.

From Shadow to Shape: “The Mask of Anarchy”

Shelley's “A Defence of Poetry” leads us to the crux of the matter: How can we articulate a Romantic politics at the intersection of its understanding of poetics? For Shelley's “Defence,” the politics of poetics is a progressive one—all poetry is inevitably poetry of the future—but, as with Blake, his most historically situated politics is located in the recent past. “The Mask of Anarchy,” written in response to the Peterloo Massacre, is fundamentally retrospective. How then can we square this with Friedrich's forward-looking wanderer or Shelley's own poet-hierophants?

While it is a stridently revolutionary poem, “The Mask of Anarchy” contains what Morton Paley identifies as an ambivalent or self-defeating aspect (91). Though the work is characteristic of late Shelley's oeuvre in strident calls to political action (White 615), it only hesitantly makes the move to the explicit, preferring abstract concepts over the individuals identified metonymically. I suggest that instead of a self-defeating poem, or an ambivalent one in contrast to Shelley's own description of poetry, “The Mask of Anarchy” is an exposition of poetry's political function insofar as it enacts fidelity to the truth of the Event. By framing the poem as fidelity, I claim that it fits in the same category of anachronistic prophecy as Blake's *America*. In the dialectic between the material past of a failed Peterloo and Shelley's figuring of a successful uprising, we have the shadow of an Evental futurity that would reconstitute this past in its light. Implicit in

the attempt is a mutation of the Badiouian thesis “the One is not” that we can rephrase as “the past *is not*,” both in the sense that the past is always counted-as-one and that it is not foreclosed. As Benjamin suggests, “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption (245).”

The poem begins with a vision of a triumph or parade of figures, Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, and Anarchy, who arrive in London and are received by “The hired murderers who did sing / ‘Thou art God, and Law, and King’ (401). The murderers are soon joined by lawyers and priests, and as a crowd they worship the figure of Anarchy. Anarchy proceeds further into the city to “meet his pensioned Parliament” when he is intercepted by a “maniac maid,” “Hope,” who identifies herself as a child of “father Time.” She proceeds to lay down in the street in front of Anarchy, “Expecting, with a patient eye \ Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy” (403).

This moment represents an abrupt halt in the movement of the procession. Anarchy anticipates a meeting with his “pensioned Parliament,” but this moment signals a halt for his physical procession as well as poem’s textual procession, which switches from Anarchy as its main subject to introduce Hope as an interlocutor. As she lies down in the street, Hope demonstrates a commitment to a politics of nonviolence and civil disobedience. In this Badiouian commitment, Hope becomes a subject in the light of a political orientation—a truth. This truth, the opening up of the possibility of political action outside the structures of Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy, paves the way for the emergence of something new, resulting in a rupture of the order of things:

When between her and her foes
A mist, a light, an image rose,
Small at first, and weak, and frail
Like the vapour of a vale:
[. . .]
It grew—a Shape arrayed in mail
Brighter than the viper’s scale,
And upborne on wings whose grain
Was as the light of sunny rain. (403)

The Shape permanently halts Anarchy's procession, while the next two stanzas describe the figure's appearance and movement, briefly pivoting to the figure of Hope, who is "walking with a quiet mien," before Anarchy's death in the next stanza:

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
Lay dead earth upon the earth;
The Horse of Death tameless as wind
Fled, and with his hoofs did grind
To dust the murderers thronged behind. (404)

All of the the remaining stanzas have the figure of earth speaking in apophasis, urging revolution and promising an egalitarian paradise.

Our primary concern is with this central moment: the introduction of the figure of Hope and the Shape. There is a curious absence of any causal relation to the figure of Hope lying down in the street and the appearance of the Shape. The Shape is unnamed and appears and disappears within the space of a few stanzas. A cursory reading suggests that the Shape kills the figure of Anarchy while Anarchy's followers are trampled to death by the Horse of Death, but the shape never explicitly does anything except move through the air above men's heads, and "thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall" (403). The Shape thus represents a deliberate break with the causal procession of the poem. Anarchy instigates the chaos in England, and the procession grows larger as various groups recognize him as "King, and God, and Lord" (402). A materialist reading of this section is entirely possible, with Anarchy representing the oppressive state powers, the other figures corresponding to the vices that enable that state (the named politicians being emblematic of those vices), and the violence and chaos wrought being a reference to the Peterloo Massacre.

Given the unprecedented appearance of first Hope and then the Shape, a different approach is necessary. Paley argues that Shelley's deliberate engagement with the Apocalypse of St. John suggests that we can read the poem as a transition from apocalypse to millennial:

The apocalyptic element in the poem comprises a transformation of events actually occurring while the millennial one consists of a future imagined as possible. Each demands and receives a different poetic mode, and although a brilliant transition is made from one to the other, one is left with the disquieting sense that this sequence may not be inevitable. (92)

The shape represents a transition, both narratively and structurally, at the center of the poem, but Paley's "disquieting sense" suggests that there is something indeterminant about the origins of the shape. Goldstein suggests that the Shape is described with meteorological metaphors in order to emphasize its materiality: "This Shape 'rose' and 'grew' from below, out of the very bodies and environments that the political-allegorical regime it replaces had reduced to 'organic substrate'" (177). For Goldstein, this Shape is a "material sublimation" (178) that emerges as "a spontaneous collective image of a multitude" (179). Goldstein's account is insightful in seeing the Shape as something more than a poetic figuration imposed upon the scene, but I want to argue that the meteorological metaphors that present the Shape as "studiously explicable as chance weather effects" (176) actually mark its Evental character as *a subtraction* from the totality of the situation. In contrast to Paley's apocalyptic transition, moreover, this reading suggests that the poem is actually operating in a single, Evental mode designed explicitly to highlight Paley's "disquieting sense" or Goldstein's "accident."

Hope's devotion to politics-as-truth-procedure breaks open the established order of things and allows for the emergence of the Shape, which is the true Event here—that which breaks from the current order of things and re-constitutes the chain of causality. The Shape is confusing within the logic of the poem precisely because it is the Event that changes that logic. It does not proceed from the procession of the poem; instead, it emerges from nowhere, appears only as an outline subtracted from the situation, and disappears almost as quickly. In its wake, it leaves a dead Anarchy and "thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall" (Shelley 403). Rather than interrupted by these transitional stanzas, the apocalyptic elements of the story are concluded within them. The world, the totalitarian politics and materiality of Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy, is opened, and the rupture is re-inscribed so that their order is not allowed to reassert itself.

Anarchy is not so much a character as a metonymy for the forces which establish and encompass the social order. The Shape does not kill Anarchy; the Shape itself is the intrusion of the multiple that explodes the count-as-one, the apparent totality of the social order. After the shape disappears, the social order is reconstituted in appeals to "Wisdom," "Justice," and "Peace" (407), and the included actors are those who

were previously excluded: residents of villages, huts, prisons, and workhouses, women, and others of “daily life” (408) This utopian political vision, unbounded in its explication, is in direct contrast to Anarchy as totalitarian vision.

Like Blake, Shelley diverges from the past not as a sentimental attempt to imagine “what might have been,” but as an attempt at political truth-procedure—a fidelity to a future Event despite its current impossibility. In *Philosophy and the Event*, Badiou sums up with unusual clarity the faithful orientation towards Events as “being subjectively disposed to recognizing new possibilities” (12). We must think the Shape of this poem with the “shadows of futurity” described at the end of “A Defence of Poetry” (701). The Shape is described as a bright light, but Shelley attempts to cast the shadow. This Badiouian analysis suggests that for Shelley, the writing of such a poem is itself a fidelity to the Event(u)al future. Shelley writes a future in which this history unfolds itself retro-causally to attempt a departure from the historical determinism of the moment—an attempt to reconstitute his own present on wholly new terms. He becomes a poet- prophet of the Event whose writing is itself a political fidelity.

Coda

This chapter indexes something that is not an exhaustive study so much as a set of notes towards a radically new understanding of a Romantic historical vision. We are tracing a Romantic sense of the Event, first as fidelity to a political vision and second as the philosophy that my next chapter explores in German Romantic criticism, though each term invokes the specter of the other. As these threads inextricably intertwine even in this chapter’s sparse examples, I leave on the subject by which I entered: Event as trace. As we trace this Event(u)ality, Badiou gives us cause to take it seriously, for we are excavating a Romantic mythopolitics wrestling seriously with challenges of early post-Kantian thought.

Chapter 3

Romanticism Against Time

We are now prepared to ask a methodological question that opens into a philosophical exercise: What relation does the vision of the Romantic poet-prophet have with our own? If this is a study framed as an excavation of a particular Romantic discourse, that excavation must imply its own historical vision, one that may itself be discussed in terms of its identity to or difference from the perspective that is its object. Simply put, to what extent is the Romantic historical vision that has hitherto been the object of this inquiry also this inquiry's critical apparatus? And what relationship does this have to contemporary Romantic Historicism, to historical criticism more generally, and criticism as an enterprise in the first place?

By way of answer, this chapter is a set of notes towards a Badiouian criticism that works through its troubled relationship to historically inflected thinking via the Romantic period as a contested site. Badiou's own, rather brief passages on these subjects show a predictable disregard for the practice of historical criticism:

Sophocles' tragedy touches us not ... because of its belonging to a previous bygone age but, rather, only inasmuch as its significance is not exhausted by that which materially binds it to its world of appearance. This is why, moreover, the "cultural" presentation of art works so in vogue today, with its painstaking reconstitution of context, obsession with History and relativization of hierarchies of value is ultimately so deadening: it operates on behalf of *our* conception of time (the historical and relativistic conception of democratic materialism) against the eternity of truths. (*SM* 26-27)

While this characterization seems a shocking violence against the complexities of historical thought, we can allow that Badiou is writing philosophically and deserves engagement in kind. If historicism is generally operating on behalf of *our* conception of time, it is fundamentally a (mis)arrangement of the order of knowledge, a continual shuffling of the elements of a given situation. In contrast, it follows that a criticism on behalf of the eternity of truths is therefore a conception *against* our conception of time, the conception that Badiou regards historicism as defending. This short final chapter will contend that what Badiou identifies as

“our conception of time” is fundamentally the same structure as Walter Benjamin ambiguously called “historical materialism.”

Romantic Historicism

Historicist criticism of the Romantic period has followed McGann in generally conceiving of the period as “marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated and deflected in various ways” (138). Thomas Pfau argues that such a framework ends up regarding the aesthetic object hiding its original conditions:

[It] views any criticism premised on the autonomy of aesthetic form, the writing subject, or grand historical narratives as unconsciously indulging (or consciously participating) in a far-flung intellectual and material conspiracy: that of occluding the political and economic significations transmitted by the text and furthermore, maintaining an order presumed to be morally and materially inequitable, if not outright oppressive. (7)

The classic example is the way that Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” elides the fact that the abbey was the site of numerous vagrants and displaced people, who are themselves displaced by the poem which “conspires” against them (Levinson 29-30). When McGann suggests that “Today the scholarship and interpretation of Romantic works is dominated by an uncritical absorption of Romanticism’s own self-representations” (137), his counterpoint is to establish the ways in which the “Romantic . . . Movement is marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated and deflected in various ways” (138). Criticism which is unable to recover the traces of these displaced persons from behind the aesthetic surface of the text is a participant, even if unconsciously, in the Romantic ideology itself. After all, McGann insists that “all Romantic poetry . . . is deeply self-critical, but only as a drama in which its own illusions must be suffered” (138).

In this light, we ought to ask a potentially embarrassing question: Is an attempt to use the Evental schema of Badiouian philosophy in order to recover and justify an Eventality within Romanticism not just a clever obfuscation of McGann’s Romantic ideology itself? Indeed, it seems plausible that the extensive parallels between Romantic thought and Badiou’s philosophy stem from a shared ideological frame, especially

in light of a project that has explicitly argued for Badiou as an “arch-Romantic.” In this frame, the allegiance to the French Revolution shared by Badiou and the Romantics (at least in the Revolution’s early phases) might well be understood as different permutations of the same scheme; the aestheticization of material conditions of historical Romanticism would thereby correspond to the obfuscation of the material conditions on which the supposedly “eternal” truths posited by Badiouian philosophy really depend, especially insofar as the radical undercurrents in both are self-pronounced responses to the same historical moment which arranged the ideological contours of their shared modernity.

A defense of timeless truths of art by reference to the timeless truths of mathematics has little appeal in light of historicism’s appeals to context and methodological assumptions, whereby the object of study is treated as always obfuscating a panoply of conditions upon which it is ultimately dependent. It behooves us to investigate historicism’s epistemological high ground, but such an appeal must not be a recourse to Badiouian ontology as a parallel explanation for the same aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed, this gesture is *necessary* insofar as it grounds this inquiry as something other than a set of parallels in which one is reduced to “thinking through Badiou with Shelley,” or vice versa.²

In response to this tension, it may be useful to begin by noting how Pfau argues that historicist Romantic critique *itself* recapitulates McGann’s sense of the Romantic Ideology:

The narratives of early Romanticism and the postmodern critique of its ideological efficacy are grounded in the same epistemological paradigm, that of forms conspiring against their belated discernment, and they perpetrate the same moral utopia, that of an absolute evaluation of the other performed with a putatively value-free and clairvoyant position. ... [T]he dream of belated clairvoyance ... continues to be reproduced, however unwittingly, by the languages of contemporary criticism. (4)

² It is worthwhile to note that this operation, implicitly granting poetry a privileged philosophical status, is what Badiou calls the “suturing” of philosophy with one of its conditions—art. In the *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou condemns “the romantic schema. Its thesis is that art *alone* is capable of truth” (HI 3). Badiou associates this schema with a Heideggerian hermeneutics (HI 5), and considers this to be a dominant trope of philosophy of the 20th century: “We could say that Heidegger unfolds the figure of the poet-thinker as the obverse of Nietzsche’s philosopher-artist. But what interests us here and characterizes the romantic schema is that between philosophy and art, it is the same truth that circulates” (HI 6-7). However, in Badiou’s philosophy, “art . . . is irreducible to philosophy” (HI 9). If we are to take Badiou’s philosophy seriously, we must establish a hermeneutics that moves beyond analogizing the relationship between Romantic poetry and contemporary philosophy.

The motif of a literature that conspires to hide the conditions of the past ends up at what Pfau calls “a paradoxical ... resemblance between the Hegelian and the New Historicist notion of totality. Where Hegel’s narrative affirms the power of the idea (and thereby, indirectly, its own narrative authority), the New Historicist inescapably traces all heterogeneous matter back to an equally monolithic idea of power” (8). The critical point for us in Pfau’s reading is the way that it is articulated through Benjamin’s theses: “The recuperative interest in past phenomena ... is perhaps best thrown into relief by Walter Benjamin’s brilliant reflections on historicism as a phantasmagoric interplay between danger and redemption” (9). For Pfau, Benjamin’s work of recovery of a past to be deployed against a political hegemony is concomitant with a recognition that “there is a secret agreement [*Verabredung*: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own. Our coming was expected upon earth” (Benjamin 245-246). The aesthetic object of the past, as a part of the conditions which have enacted its own critical recovery, effectively deploys in front of it the critic³ who will retroactively complete it by revealing the “political and economic significations transmitted by the text.”

³ I use this spatial metaphor to evoke Lacan’s description of the chain of signification. Lacan says that “the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it” (419). Lacan makes this point at the level of the sentence, “when [the sentence] is interrupted before the significant term: ‘I’ll never...,’ ‘The fact remains...,’ ‘Still perhaps...’ Such sentences nevertheless make sense, and that sense is all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it” (419). Lacan’s rather banal point about the structure of the sentence takes on a more significance in the context of a previous section:

Now the structure of the signifier is, as is commonly said of language, that it is articulated.

This means that its units—no matter where one begins in tracing out their reciprocal encroachments and expanding inclusions—are subject to the twofold condition of being reduced to ultimate differential elements and of combining the latter according to the laws of a closed order.

[. . .]

The second property of the signifier, that of combining according to the laws of a closed order, affirms the necessity of the topological substratum, of which the term I ordinarily use, “signifying chain,” gives an approximate idea: links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links. (418)

This general structure is deployed in Lacan’s discussion of the sentence, but it is unclear what prevent this structure from structuring orders of language beyond the minutia of the sentence. I borrow Lacan’s language to suggest a relationship here that is at minimum analogy, but perhaps bears a stronger connection. If the signifier anticipates meaning, does not the text as well? Lacan reminds us that “it is not because grammatical and lexical approaches are exhausted at a certain point that we must think that signification rules unreservedly beyond it. That would be a mistake” (418).

Count and Account, Presentation and Representation

Pfau lights on the closed-loop nature of this procedure when he points out that “philosophical, fictional, and prophetic narratives of early Romanticism are predicated on precisely those conspiratorial, redemptive forms of intellectual production subsequently mobilized as a means of overcoming the period’s “aesthetic ideology” (11). Romantic Historicism is stuck unraveling a past which has determined and preordained that historicism insofar as it has deployed ahead of itself an image of its apparent totality. The Historicist gesture, in attempting to reveal the material conditions that this totality obscures, finds behind it only the conditions of our present historical methodologies (“Our coming was expected on earth.”). The counter-conspiratorial critic who is intent on revealing the material conditions of the past behind the aesthetic object ultimately defers the trope of Revelation onto a criticism which the past seemingly inaugurates *avant a lettre*: “Behind the figure of conspiracy, then, stand the dream of criticism as a form of revelation, a mode of producing knowledge indemnified from all charges of methodological complicity in the construction and articulation of its objects” (4). No less than the hypothetical Badiouian critic, it is contemporary critical historicism then that is engaged in this trans-temporal closed loop, where the figure of the Romantic visionary is deferred, deployed in front of the letter until it rests on the figure of the critic herself.

McGann dismisses Romanticism’s autocritical tendencies as reifying a higher-level “illusion” (138), but he fails to note that this “illusion” itself sets the stage for the critic who can pull back the curtains, so to speak, revealing an outside to the poetry onto which the disavowed tropes of revelation, authenticity, etc. can be themselves displaced. Benjamin indicts this particular formulation with the first of his theses:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight. (245)

The fundamental motif of the historicism that Benjamin condemns under the name “historical materialism” is the one which “is to win” all the time by positing a false transparency which undergirds the situation.

Underneath the illusion of the automaton is a false transparency, a second illusion which paradoxically grounds the veracity of the first. The automaton is made to function by an external agency which it disavows its own complicity in the situation. The actual movements of the automaton are controlled by “theology,”—thinking which grounds itself in an ahistorical absolute. The crypto-theological tropes of the Romantic ideology⁴ are deferred to the historicist who “keeps out of sight.”

It is in direct contrast to the figure of the “historical materialism” which is aided by a secreted theology that Benjamin his conception of the historical materialist who participates in *awareness* of the claim the past has upon them:

There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that. (246)

In this formulation, we are presented with nothing less than the Badiouian structure and metastructure. The aesthetic surface of the past which presents itself as a Romantic text is “exposed to the danger of the void” (*BE* 93). That is, it is a presented multiple in which one element escapes the count—the count itself. Put differently, in the past’s presentation as material sediments, the text stands as nothing more than a single structure; “The ‘there is Oneness’ is a pure operational result, which transparently reveals the very operation from which the result results” (*BE* 94). The text stands nakedly as nothing more than a set of incidental vagaries of historical effluvium, a simple presentation within a situation that lacks any metastructure to ground that original operation. The historicist critic here (and the critic in general)⁵, is deployed in front of the text by the exigencies of history, in what Pfau calls an “epistemological abjection” (10), that is, the awareness

⁴ M. H. Abram’s *Natural Supernaturalism* embarks on reading the Romantic project as a recurrence of repressed theological discourse of mysticism and revelation within a modernity in which such discourse was no longer possible.

⁵ Here, “critic” is being used in a sense other than Badiou’s own comments on criticism (particularly the critic of the theater), but his sense of the critic as a representative of the aleatory public is useful for its contrast with the historically bound critic of our deterministic circuit (*HI* 75).

that the critic's own historical project is as determined as the aesthetic object of the past, and moreover, insofar as the mere existence and of the aesthetic object is one of the necessary conditions of its critical recovery, is to some degree determined *by* the aesthetic object of the past. This is precisely what Benjamin means by the "secret agreement between past generation and the present one." The critic is resigned to reveal what was behind and beneath the aesthetic structure so as to protect it from the nakedness of the count (the deterministic vagaries of history).

As Badiou says, "all situations are structured twice. This also means: there is always both presentation and representation." This second count or metastructure, which is detailed in our first chapter, "is responsible for establishing, in danger of the void, that it is universally attested that, in the situation, the one is" (94). The methodology of the historicist critic is to account for the past as incomplete only insofar as this incompleteness of the past always affirms a meta-structure in the form already described above: the "displaced" material conditions whereby the incompleteness of the past is to be filled in by its articulation in the present. This (ac)count is what Pfau is referring to in the historicist impulse to rewrite the past:

In opposing the volubility of its own critical narrative against the referential autism of the period's aesthetic, Romantic Historicism has effectively sought to rewrite and change not the future but the past, a past allegedly forestalled by the (unconscious) conspiracy of its formal-aesthetic values and practices. (8)

As per Badiou, the count-as-one⁶ which forms the original aesthetic object, in order that it might not reveal the multiple anterior to the count, is saved from the void by a historicist account.

Badiou's work allows us to better schematize Benjamin's original insight. When Pfau glosses Benjamin's theses to say that "Critique thus emerges as a moment of interference between an intuitive commitment to action and an encroaching consciousness of one's epistemological abjection" (10), which gives rise to the critic's "*weak* Messianic power" (Benjamin 246), we can see that Benjamin's original intuition

⁶ Here, we must remember that "every situation admits its own particular operator of the count-as-one" (BE 24), and that, by extension, every metastructure which structures that situation has a particular operator. This is Badiou's most general definition of structure, which applies to any presented multiple, not just to the cosmically scaled categories of "world," "universe," or "materiality" which we are used to associating with ontology. For our argument, it is imperative that we not allegorize the relationship between the text/account and structure/metastructure.

is correct, for in the moment that the structure of the aesthetic presentation is itself structured by critical response, what is revealed is not the hyperchaos of a multiple *qua* multiple, but a oneness that is grounded in a structured historical context. To re-write the past is always to function as the unconscious supplement of a past which compels its own re-presentation, but this compulsion contains within it the conditions of an Evental site.

The task of the critic is not to achieve the affective despair of Historicism's awareness of "the continuous displacements and deceptions of power," much less to lay claim to the false positivism of crypto-Hegelian "unconscious processes" (Pfau 9). Instead, it is to understand the excess of a historical vision over the past which lays claim to it: the second count includes within the situation elements which lay, in Badiouian terms, at the edge of the void. We can recall here Benjamin's sixth thesis: To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way that it really was' . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger (247). The danger to the past is one which threatens at the same time the historian ("The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers" (247)). This danger is the very historical closed loop that we have identified, that, as Badiou observes "singularities . . . can always be *normalized*: as is shown, moreover, by socio-political History; any Evental site can, in the end, undergo a state normalization"(BE 176). The task of the historicist critic then is to deploy historicity against History and particularly against the deterministic causal framework upon which it depends. Such an operation can only be carried out, as Benjamin informs us, at a moment of danger, at the moment where the Event, as well as the aesthetic object by which we are referred to it, is forever "lost to history." For it is only in the face of the epistemological abjection engendered by the metastructure of the historicist account that we are able to recognize the terms within it which are supernumerary to the original multiple that is presented as the aesthetic object. The critic, just as much as the artist, is compelled then to decide whether an Event has taken place, decide that a truth has entered the world by aleatory process, and "come to be inscribed within it" (HI 56). In the "moment of danger," "The choice that binds the subject to a truth is the choice of continuing to be: fidelity to the Event, fidelity to the void" (HI 55).

This point is not an elaborate defense of the fictionality of criticism, historical or otherwise, wherein critical work just adds to an ongoing flow of textualities, but a minimal defense of criticism as itself an artistic endeavor concomitant to the same Badiouian truth procedure as art itself. As such, a Badiouian criticism avoids the affectual despair of the self-referentiality of Romantic Historicism by performing what is itself a deeply Romantic gesture: recognizing that within the representation demanded by the presentation—insofar as “we have been expected upon this earth”—there are always terms that are genuinely *novel*. And just as for Benjamin’s figure of the ancient Jews, “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (255), the Badiouian schema demands a criticism “shot through with chips of Messianic time” (255) insofar as it participates in the artistic truth procedure. The process of a Badiouian Romantic criticism, and perhaps of criticism in general, is to conspire with a past which is in the process of arranging its own “forms of knowledge in such a way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them” (*HI* 9).

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