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Romantic Bliss—or, Romanticism Is Not an Optimism

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes to rethink Romanticism through the concept of bliss. I suggest not only that bliss is a core Romantic concept but also, more speculatively, that Romanticism as both a project and tendency is generated out of an antagonistic entanglement between bliss and the world of Western modernity. As the state of immediate fulfillment, free of alienation or negativity, bliss is what modernity at once promises and endlessly defers—and so bliss erupts in Romanticism against the modern world. In bliss, the world is dissolved as in water, consumed as in fire, so that nothing remains except the ecstasy of the world's annihilation or termination. Romanticism seeks to inhabit the utopia of bliss immanently; however, the world re-mediates bliss into a long-lost past or an unreachable future, because it is through this re-mediation that the world reproduces and justifies itself. As a result, Romanticism falls into endless approximation, into nostalgia and longing—and bliss becomes infinitely not-yet, fragmented, defused by the world. This essay moves through German and British Romanticism so as to collect the scattered fragments of bliss, and to re-assemble Romantic bliss in its a-worldly immanence, its post-Copernican cosmic infinity, and its (often violent) clash with the world.

The world is too much with us. (Wordsworth)

The scenes are familiar. A solitary poet, removed from "the fever of the world" yet one with the radical immanence of all life: "the bliss of solitude" (Wordsworth 133, 304). A wanderer atop the mountain, high above the world, looking at the endless expanse of clouds below that merges, on the horizon, with the sky: a vast, atemporal oneness of heaven and earth. A young heart welcoming the first delight of love "with a romantic expectation that it will expand into bliss" (Radcliffe 21). A bliss of love found, in which two are as one, "only in and with" the other (Schelling, *Werke* 15: 123), consumed in the fire of love—"what is the world to them?" (Thomson 33)—or in which all nature is one in love, and the power of "love, now a universal birth," spreads immediately, also akin to fire, "from heart to heart," "from earth to man, from man to earth" (Wordsworth 55), collapsing all divisions of the world. A thinker, her eyes turned to heaven, in a little boat amidst the watery calm in which all relation to the world and all worldly care feel forever dissolved—"*rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully

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at the sky" (Adorno 157).[1] Or the utopic epoch of absolute identity, "heaven regained," and eternal peace—without the negativity of alienation, domination, or striving: a kingdom of God realized (Schelling, *Werke* 12: 470). All of these are scenes of bliss.

Few words sound more immediately Romantic than "bliss" and yet, despite the prevalence of images of bliss and terms such as *bliss*, *blissfulness*, or *blessedness* in Romantic literature, the immanent logic of bliss in Romanticism remains unexplored. In this essay, I want to suggest that not only is there a common thread of bliss running through German and British Romanticism, but also that bliss is a core Romantic concept which can serve to reveal the stakes of Romanticism vis-à-vis the world of Western modernity. My speculative proposition is the following. *Romanticism as project and as tendency is generated out of an antagonistic entanglement between bliss and the modern world*. The same holds for many of the familiar Romantic logics: Romantic love and solitude, restlessness and calm, endless longing and apocalyptic utopianism, acosmism and (natural, human, cosmic) unity. In other words, my suggestion is twofold: first, there is a constitutive tension between bliss and the modern world—bliss constitutes something like the repressed underside of modernity, on which modernity feeds yet which, in the same stroke, it forecloses; second, among its other possible meanings, "Romanticism" names a site where this tension comes to the fore and bliss is affirmed *as such*, in all of its antagonism towards the world.

The essence of this antagonism, this clash between bliss and the world, may be axiomatically described as follows. The modern world is infinitely negative, diremptive, and exhausting. It demands endless work towards an endlessly deferred telos. It promises fulfillment and non-alienation in the future while using this very promise to foreclose them in the now, to reproduce the way things are, and to bind the subject in its self-assertion to the imperatives of possession and production. Instead of overcoming alienation and negativity, modernity ends up intensifying them: the burden of the world become unbearable.[2] By contrast, bliss indexes a state of undivided immanence free of possession or mastery, an immediate fulfillment without any need or want, without otherness or telos. In bliss, all negativity and alienation, all imperatives of work and striving are dissolved into an ante-original state of absolute oneness, indifference, and nonrelation. Bliss is nonmediational and nonproductive, atemporal and utopic. Time stops in bliss, the world vanishes, and the soul is "suspended … in Rapture's blissful Trance" (Coleridge 16: 15). Bliss collapses the categorial structure of the world's articulation and equals an absolute freedom from the world, in which all binaries that serve to constitute the world are immediately revealed as null and void—including the binaries of subject and object, self and other, being and nothingness, life and death, day and night. Bliss is apocalyptic: it dissolves the world as in water, consumes it as in fire, so that nothing remains except the ecstasy of the world's "annihilation" or "termination."[3] It engenders the Gnostic imperative: *the world must not be*. In this manner, the overwhelming negativity of the modern world generates the ultimate negation: the refusal, even annihilation of this world itself, demanded *right now*. Bliss is what modernity at once promises and endlessly defers—and so bliss erupts in Romanticism against the modern world.

What the world promises yet forecloses comes back to haunt it, and Romanticism is a site of this haunting, emerging at modernity's post-Enlightenment, post-Revolutionary moment of crisis and self-reflection. The illusory and the real reach here a point of indistinction (is it bliss that is illusory? or is it the world?), sometimes peaceful, often violent.

However, I want to suggest, it is also where bliss in a certain sense *fails*, becoming infinitely not-yet and endlessly approximated, evaporating into a nostalgia for a lost past or a longing for an unreachable future, becoming fragmented, defused, and re-mediated by the world. This failure is instructive, because it is through the failure of Romanticism that the modern world survives. In what follows, I move through German and British Romanticism so as to collect and re-assemble some of the fragments of bliss, scattered in its encounter with the world.

1. Ecstatic immanence

> Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
> On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss … . (Wordsworth)

For understanding Romantic bliss, it is crucial that, in German and British Romanticism, *Seligkeit* and *bliss*, respectively, form one conceptual nexus with *beatitude*, *blessedness*, and *salvation*. There is, of course, an entire tradition behind this nexus. Importantly for us, Schelling in 1795 does not hesitate to use *Seligkeit* at once as "bliss," as "salvation" (the theological meaning of the German word), and as a translation for Spinoza's *beatitudo*.[4] Earlier, the same nexus can be found in Kant. Luther's Bible also renders "Blessed are … " (*beati*/*makarioi*) as "Selig sind … " In English, a similar nexus formed around *bliss* through its association with *bless*, and through what *Oxford English Dictionary* calls "the gradual tendency to withdraw *bliss* from earthly 'blitheness' to the beatitude of the blessed in heaven." *Bliss* and *Seligkeit* thus map onto each other rather accurately. Generally, two intertwined trajectories underlie modern thinking of bliss: the "pagan" philosophical one, informed particularly by Stoicism and Epicureanism, where bliss is associated with the highest state of the soul, without relation to the inconstancy of the world (yet not otherworldly); and the Christian trajectory of bliss as otherworldly salvation or mystical oneness with God in which the world is annihilated. Romanticism's "secularization thesis" may be said to consist in affirming bliss as salvation from and annihilation of the world, and as not of the world, *without* thinking of it as otherworldly.

It may be tempting to classify "bliss" in Romanticism under the rubrics of "happiness" or "pleasure." However, bliss is neither. It is an ontological state that is as "moral" as it is "religious," refusing, like many other Romantic conceptualities, to fit neatly into the secular/religious binary. The ontological here precedes the affective, and it is only from the ontological that the affective can be grasped. As Coleridge writes, whereas "pleasure" is related to the senses, "bliss" or "beatitude" pertains to our "moral being," even if pleasure may be the effect of bliss (*Collected Works* [hereafter *CW*] 11: 599)—as in Wordsworth's "bliss of solitude," filling one's "heart with pleasure" (304). Bliss is a moral state because it is divine and virtuous—the state of the soul's highest perfection. Happiness, too, should be distinguished from bliss. It is, says Coleridge in his *Notebooks*, "that which *haps*, which is our Hap—a congruous disposition of the Contingencies relative to our well-being" (3: 4422). Happiness is what *happens* to us, or the way the world happens to stand in agreement with our soul. It is "the Soul's self-finding as modified by and in harmony with her Relatives and Circumstants" (4: 5197). As such, happiness is relative and contingent. It is always *in* the world, standing under the influence of worldly circumstances. By contrast, bliss, grouped by Coleridge with "blessedness,"

beatitudo, and *makariotes*, is a state of lived "holiness," free of being affected by contingent circumstances or goals (3: 4422). It is "the Soul's self-finding in its own state," without being "modified" by anything accidental (4: 5197). In bliss as the "intuitive beholding of truth in its eternal and immutable source" (*CW* 4: 104–05), the soul is without relation to the world yet one with the divine truth.

In the above, Coleridge likely builds on Schelling's ideas of bliss and intellectual intuition. Coleridge's play on "happiness" and "hap" adapts into English the distinction from Schelling's 1795 *Philosophical Letters*. In Schelling's German, the wordplay serves to separate happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) from bliss (*Seligkeit*). The concept of *Glückseligkeit*, Schelling says, contains the component of *Glück* (lucky chance) as something that happens *to* us: "we owe our happiness not to ourselves, but to lucky chance" (*Werke* 3: 92). As Schelling writes in another 1795 text, *Of the I*, happiness consists in the "agreement of objects with our I," "of the not-I with the I" (*Werke* 2: 124). Bliss, however, is free from chance, and absolutely free from (the influence of) the world. "Where *there is absolute freedom*," goes Schelling's formula, "*there is absolute bliss*, and vice versa" (3: 94). Bliss is a state of holiness in which the world is completely suspended and the soul immanently refuses any relation to an outside, beholding instead the one absolute being: "intuiting the eternal in us" (3: 87). In bliss, the eternal in us coincides with the eternal in nature and in God, indexing the one undivided being in which there is, properly speaking, no I opposed to the not-I, no self opposed to an alienated other or to an objective reality against which the I would assert itself.

In a way, both German and British Romanticism may be said to begin with visions of bliss—in the 1795 Schelling, but also in Coleridge, even before what is known to be Schelling's comprehensive influence on him. Three of Coleridge's earliest poems, written in 1787, are already structured around the theme of bliss. Thus, "Easter Holidays" begins with a celebration of the rebirth of nature during Easter through "the power of love," in which the dancing "youths" are joined by all of nature—beasts, birds, the river, and the echo from the hills. This bliss is, however, oblivious to the "woe, / Which all mankind are born to know," or to the fall from innocence that awaits them in the world. The poem ends with a celebration, too—of a bliss regained through virtue, no longer a "thoughtless" childlike bliss but "a heav'n born content," an indifference to the intricacies of the world. In a state of utter nonrelation, "without respect to any tide," the virtuous person "His hours away in bliss shall glide, / Like Easter all the year" (*CW* 16: 9–10). These final verses present an image of perfect serenity ("gliding" on the surface of time as on water in which the world is dissolved) and eternal spring, the soul's paradise restored. The poem expands bliss into a scene of an absolute oneness of the heavenly, the natural, and the human, which all immediately coincide in the *now* of immanent resurrection—Schelling's "heaven regained." The negativity of the world appears as a tear in the immanently atemporal bliss, an "exile from bliss" (an image guiding another of Coleridge's 1787 poems, "Dura Navis" [16: 6]), a pulling-apart of the one undivided being, due to which bliss is re-mediated into a childhood bliss and a future bliss to be (re)gained.

Wordsworth's "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House" may be said to pick up on the images of eternal spring and universal resurrection, with love as rebirth binding everything in an immediate unity: "Love … / From heart to heart is stealing, / From earth to man, from man to earth." The verb "steal" may suggest here a spreading of love that is silent or invisible (to the world), "stealing" the selfhood or self-possession

of things—so that, suddenly, all seeming independence of worldly selfhood is consumed by love. "It is the first mild day of March" and "there is a blessing in the air," begins the poem—culminating in a scene of the "year to come" spent like this, without negativity or toil, in passivity and "idleness," one with "the blessed power that rolls / About, below, above," in a being that is absolutely one, possessed by no one in particular. Within this being, the poetic speaker's "sense of joy" coincides with that of his companions, their souls, like all of nature, "tuned to love." This bliss is, again, atemporal: a *now* that exceeds any rationally calculable measure of worldly time ("One moment now may give us more / Than fifty years of reason") (54–55). There is here no appropriation, no use, no work of production or synthesis. *The Prelude* calls this bliss the "one life" (403), a being that is ante-originally undivided and unenclosed—*Home at Grasmere*'s "unappropriated bliss" (176).

In this blissful *now*, the particular coincides with the universal immediately, without the negativity of synthesis but also without foreclosing the being of the particular. Immediate coincidence of the particular with the universal is precisely how Schelling characterizes bliss (*Werke* 12: 133). In the early 1800s especially, he seeks to re-vision all being as bliss—a utopic standpoint to which the soul is immediately transported in intellectual intuition. To intuit this bliss is to see each finite being as free of negativity or striving: to see the *it is what it is* at the heart of everything, an A = A, in which the finite being's particularity is dissolved in the pure "=." The first thing we intuit in any A = A, Schelling claims, is not the "A" (the particular *what*) but the "=," "the identity itself" or the pure "is" (10: 119)—a bliss that cannot be captured by the Hegelian dialectic of mediation and otherness. In bliss, everything simply *is*, without any further determination. In this way, A = A and B = B dissolve equally into the pure "=," so that A's and B's particularity vanishes. This "absolute identity" or "absolute being" cuts through all divisions and enclosures of the particular, collapsing the distinctions between particular and universal, lower and higher, human and non-human into a radical immanence common to all things.[5] To intuit this being-in-common is to see each finite being nonrelationally, without comparing it to other beings, without viewing it as lacking or superior, or even as different or other. It is to let everything simply be what it is: an absolute letting-be. This "absolute freedom" is distinct from the finite freedom of self-assertion, striving, and mastery, through which the modern world is upheld and reproduced.

What is disclosed in this letting-be is an all-oneness of bliss, not merely as a state of the soul, but as a radical immanence prior to and below the world—the one immanence that the world encloses, particularizes, negatively and transcendently imposes itself upon. Borrowing a term from the later Schelling, this immanence of bliss may be called *ecstatic*, since it empties out all selfhood and transports the soul to a standpoint that is prior to all particularity and division. It may also be called *utopic*, since it cannot be identified with any particular position in the world, refusing to be inscribed into the world's spatial and temporal topography. As such, bliss cannot be achieved through mediation and synthesis, since these imply an originally divided reality to be synthesized and mediated. Instead, bliss discloses the undivided real itself, preceding and refusing all mediation. ("The absolute" as such, Schelling insists, "can never be mediated" [*Werke* 2: 109].) This absolutely-real must be thought of as primary vis-à-vis the world, and the negativity of the world as secondary, imposed, and fundamentally *not* (the) real.

Thereby, in bliss, all being is exhibited indifferently, that is to say, without the negativity of difference, relation, or striving. An unorthodox logic of totality may be glimpsed here: a utopic totality of all-dissolution. When love spreads "from heart to heart," "from earth to man, from man to earth," the preposition *to* indexes at once the divisions of the world and their immediate collapse. All being, as it were, immediately expands into bliss, and absolute ecstasy coincides with absolute serenity within one radical immanence. The example of love is paradigmatic here, because love ontologically exceeds and precedes the self. For Schelling, in love, the souls coincide in the one absolute being, to the point of an absolute dissolution of and freedom from the world. This marks love as blissfully indifferent, in two senses: as indifferent to the world, and as not based on differentiation or rational choice. It is, writes Schelling in his novella *Clara*, only "this completely external world" that "separates" the two "related souls" which are, in fact, ante-originally one, deferring their unification through "centuries, large distances, or the intricacies of the world" (72).[6] The world cares not for love, it only cares about (its own) reproduction. Nor does love care for the world, or for the divisions, intricacies, and not-yets on which the existence of this finite world depends. If anything, the hypothetical scenario in which all "related souls" immediately became one would imply a total dissolution of the world's distances and temporalities, and thus a complete cessation of the world.

Moreover, loving infinitely and being infinitely loved are undifferentiated in the absoluteness of love. Absolute bliss, says Schelling, is at once "unlimited activity"—since in it there is no otherness, nothing that would delimit or negate it—and radical passivity or infinite "repose" (*Ruhe* [*Werke* 3: 94]), just as in Wordsworthian bliss the one infinite life coincides with nonproductivity and idleness. The subject is dissolved in bliss, too, ceasing to be just that: a subject. For, if there is nothing to strive for, nothing to negate or overcome, no positions to occupy, possessions to accumulate, or goals to achieve, what would subjectivity even consist in? One would simply *be what one is*, coinciding in this with the All. As a result, the Romantic "I" is essentially one with the Romantic "we," the "we" of lovers, soulmates, true companionship, and true *communio*—a oneness in nonrelation to the world. In bliss, twoness and oneness immediately coincide. Become absolute, the I ceases to be an I, a transcendental subject or a subject of self-assertion. The self is absolutely dispossessed in bliss, *entkleidet* (stripped bare; 3: 87), deprived (*beraubt*) of all property, particularity, or possession (3: 93).

In a perfectly Schellingian manner, in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," the bliss that suspends the world indexes simultaneously the soul's solitude, completeness, and oneness with the All. The "wild secluded scene" merges here with the "more deep seclusion" arising as the mind "behold[s] these steep and lofty cliffs" which, in turn, serve to merge together the earth and the sky (131)—what *Home at Grasmere* calls the "blended holiness of earth and sky," "a Whole without dependence or defect," "perfect Contentment, Unity entire" (178). In both poems, seclusion coincides with the radical immanence of all being. The resulting identity is a "serene and blessed mood" that "almost suspend[s]" all corporeal motion, so that

> … we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things. (132–33)

This seeing sees not the world of objects, but the one absolute being (the "one life" or "the life of things"), at once elevating the soul to a higher truth and merging it with the underside of the world, with an immanence that underlies all life: a blending-together of what is below ("earth") and what is above ("sky").

There is a minimal motion to this oneness (hence Wordsworth's "almost suspended"), but it has a still, practically atemporal rhythm—a breathing ("the calm / Which Nature breathes" [382]) that coincides with absolute stillness, like waves dissolving into the infinite surface of the ocean. Consider in this regard "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," which speaks of "the bliss of solitude" as transporting the soul immediately to the atemporal standpoint of "dancing with the daffodils" that, in turn, dance with the waves and the breeze (303–04). In "Tintern Abbey," this plenitude of non-separation reveals the one life in "the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean, and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man"—the absolute cosmic power that "rolls through all things," preceding and indifferentiating them (134). Or as Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude*, looking back at his experience of bliss:

> … when with bliss ineffable
> I felt the sentiment of Being spread
> O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still. (402)

Bliss is "ineffable" insofar as it collapses the entire structure of the world's categorial articulation, and the "sentiment of Being spread" indexes the infinite expanse of bliss, which underlies and cuts through all enclosures of the world, "rolling" through and overflowing the world as in a universal flood, blending together the earth, the sea, and the heavens into a pre-original, more-than-human vastness.

"Rolling" and "spreading" point here to the immediate intuiting or enactment of the all-oneness of bliss in which infinite movement and infinite stillness immanently coincide. This all-oneness is absolutely nonteleological and nonproductive, a nature that immanently refuses to strive, to dialecticize itself.[7] As the all-dissolving totality, as leaving nothing to the world, as unmediated by the world, bliss seems to have the power to suspend the world: "I seemed to feel such liberty was mine, / Such power and joy" (174)—the power and joy that can only be found in refusing and collapsing the divisions of the world. The bliss of all-dissolution is contrasted by Wordsworth with the "joyless" world, negative and exhausting. This world demands that one keep up the pace towards a goal that cannot be achieved, serving only to reproduce the same "fretful stir / Unprofitable, and the fever of the world" (133). In bliss, all of this is collapsed. As Schelling notes, the idea of absolute freedom is that of an "absolute power" which "not only stands far above" the empirical world "but even *annihilates* it" (*Werke* 2: 122). Wordsworth, too, speaks of bliss as "a termination, and a last retreat," of and from the world (178). The ecstatic immanence of bliss is absolutely a-worldly, and to affirm bliss *right now* is to annihilate the world.

2. Foreclosure (and song) of bliss

> That blisse may not abide in state of mortall men. (Edmund Spenser)

I will not go here into all the ways in which modernity forecloses bliss (which the cruel optimism of the late-capitalist world[8] continues to do to this day). Instead, I want to place

the immanent thinking and affirmation of bliss in Romanticism between two acts of such foreclosure—in Kant and in Charles Darwin. The bliss of nature, Wordsworth's "Elysian quiet, without toil or strife" (327), is what Darwin seeks to deconstruct:

> We behold the face of nature bright with gladness … we do not see, or we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey. (50–51)

Bliss can only be atemporal and nonreproductive, and so, in order to dismantle it, Darwin inscribes it into the logic of reproduction, and into the reproductive divisions between particular species and generations, with all the violence that a world of reproduction and the reproduction of the world entail. As if to counteract the collapse of worldly divisions in Romantic bliss, the utopic scene of bliss is itself collapsed here, brought forcefully back into the world—and Wordsworthian idle song, as indexing the infinite immanence preceding and exceeding the divisions and speciations of the world, is converted into finitude and danger, precisely into "toil and strife."

Crucially, if nature can no longer serve as a site of bliss, and thus of antagonism to the world, then the space of such antagonism shrinks whereas the world expands. At its most radical, bliss is metaphysically affirmed in Romanticism as the utopic standpoint from which to proclaim the world as imposed and unreal. The Romantics know full well that bliss is impossible from the viewpoint of the world, or possible only momentarily *despite* the world. However, that is the Romantic point: to reject the modern world's claim to absoluteness and to constituting the ultimate horizon of reality and possibility, and to begin with bliss as that which is impossible yet real, that which the world excludes and over which it has no power, the nonplace where the world's binary logics and structures do not hold—to begin with bliss as the utopic standpoint from which the negativity of the world does not appear as omnipresent or all-powerful, or even does not appear at all. Darwin's anti-Romantic operation, however, amounts to a further expansion of the negative logic of the world, a further act of enclosure of the one common immanence —the next step in modernity's foreclosure of bliss. (The emergence of so-called "social Darwinism" makes this foreclosure politically explicit.) Increasingly in modernity, there is *nowhere to escape* from the world. In order to reproduce and justify itself—to justify hope in its own infinitely approximated futurity—the modern world seeks to re-mediate bliss, since the world *is* mediation and survives through catching everything into its ever-expanding nets of negativity, relation, and the not-yet.

Not to let the subject escape the world of toil and strife also forms a central tendency of Kant's thinking—so that the project of Romanticism as a speculative post-Kantian idealism of bliss may be understood as an insistence on bliss in the face of its Kantian foreclosure. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Seligkeit* is associated at once with the atemporal divine self-sufficiency—"a perfect good [*Wohl*] that is independent from all contingent worldly causes"—and a "blissful future" that only God can possess, a "holiness" that "can never be fully attained by the creature" (25, 123). Bliss, Kant writes, is "only reachable in an eternity" (128), and thus, from the perspective of finite being in the world, constitutively deferred into an unreachable future. To dream of a being without striving, *right now*, of bliss simply as an immediate "possession" (*Besitz*)—by which Kant means here something that one simply has or is by virtue of one's mere

being, the Schellingian pure "="—amounts to delusional "theosophic dreams." The only (rational) thing to do for a finite rational creature is to embrace this life of "ceaseless striving" (122–23). And so Kant consistently orients human being in the world towards an endlessly approximated telos. In effect, readings of Romanticism that equate it with endless approximation are Kantian readings which, by neglecting Romanticism's *immediate* embrace of absolute bliss and its programmatic attempt to *begin* with bliss (and not with or from within the world), miss the antagonistic essence of Romanticism, emerging as it is at the moment of modernity's simultaneous consolidation and crisis. For Romanticism, the modern logics of endless approximation, negativity, and finitude, are the burning problem—a fact that the Romantics may sometimes embrace as inevitable but that nevertheless makes them endlessly anxious, infinitely full of longing, striving not to reproduce but to break free of the world—so that Novalis's oft-quoted aphorism, "We *seek* everywhere the unconditioned [*das Unbedingte*] but always *find* only things [*Dinge*]" (*Werke* 227), may be said to express a vexation at the world's foreclosure of bliss. Born out of this foreclosure yet against it, Romanticism seeks to affirm bliss immediately and immanently, and only falls into endless approximation because the world forecloses bliss.

For Kant, by contrast, everything—all progress of morality and freedom—hinges on the affirmation and reproduction of the world. Hegel will famously claim that world-history is theodicy, that is, the justification of negativity and suffering as the necessary path to the highest good: the development of freedom. This theodical tendency stands already at the heart of Kant's essays on world-history from the 1780s. There is, Kant claims in "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," no regaining of paradisal bliss from within the post-lapsarian world—and furthermore, no paradise to be regained. Kant's dismantling of paradise resembles proleptically Darwin's disenchantment of nature. Paradise, Kant avers, cannot be anything but a brutish state of animality and the rule of instinct. The Fall should be understood, accordingly, as the awakening of reason. Reason drove the human out of the "secure condition of childcare, from out of a garden … and thrust him into the wide world, where so many worries, troubles, and unknown ills awaited him" (29). In this way, the development of reason and freedom begins, always proceeding through negativity, war, and strife. As weak and mortal, the human must assert itself vis-à-vis the hostile world, across generations—in Kant's reproductive optimism, "to live through [one's] offspring, who would perhaps have it better" (28), becomes the foundation of hope in the future.

Kant's association of the world with the dual imperative of toil and reproduction is striking. Given the negativity of the world, a longing to return to an "imagined seat of bliss" is understandable (29). However, this is but an "empty longing." If anything, the mature human being must deride the very idea of "a carefree life of lazy daydreaming" (36) with nothing to do but "rest in calm inactivity and perpetual peace and dream and fritter away [one's] existence" (29). And while Kant himself may imagine the utopian future of eternal peace, not only does he constitutively defer it ("only God knows when this would be" [35])—he argues that this state itself cannot be allowed to be completely free of strife and danger, "so that humankind's powers do not fall into slumber" (12). Kant forecloses forcefully the utopia of doing nothing, urging the subject "to put himself … patiently through the toils of life" (29), "*to be content with*

providence (even though it has laid such a toilsome path for us)," and to focus on "self-improvement" (34).

In a structural displacement of guilt, deficiency and evil must be regarded as "our own" fault, not the world's, which is thereby exonerated. But why not refuse the demands of the world? Why not call the world out on its (and not "our") evil? Because, Kant's theodical optimism tells us, we should have faith in a better future, a future that the world is supposed to provide. At a point where the cruelty of such a future becomes unbearable, however, to annihilate the world may look like a better—indeed, the more rational—option, despite Kant's or Hegel's theodical *reductio* of philosophy and rationality. Perhaps one can reconfigure Horkheimer's dictum that, behind philosophy's affirmation of "truth *an sich*," "conceals itself the theological goal of eternal bliss, which philosophy took over as the heiress of Christianity" (281) and which indexes "what is other than the world as it is" (390). This would make it possible to weaken the theodical bond between philosophy and world-justification, a bond that is central to modern thought from Leibniz onwards. At its limit, this would make philosophy, not unlike poetry, into a utopic space of world-delegitimation, instead of the world-reconstructing and world-upholding activity that it has so often been (and that it also, even more centrally, inherited from Christianity).

Thus, for Schelling, "absolute reason" equals absolute freedom and bliss, not the modern rationality of subject-object division, appropriation, and mastery. Likewise, his 1800 *System* ends with a Romantic call for the dissolution of the world into an "ocean of poetry" (*Werke* 9: 328). The oneness of poetry and philosophy expresses Romanticism's insistence on inhabiting bliss immanently and totally. Romantic utopia is immanently unlimited; it is the vastness of all-dissolution. Romanticism sings the utopia of bliss or speculatively thinks this song, both in its absolute (a-worldly) necessity and the frailty and contingency of its finite expression vis-à-vis modernity's inescapable imposition of the world. The call of poetry, which philosophy must take up, is a Gnostic call of bliss that does not interpellate, singing of utopic oneness and salvation from the world. The effect of Wordsworth's song on his friend Coleridge, upon the latter's reading of *The Prelude*, is telling:

> Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
> I sate, my being blended in one thought
> (Thought was it? or Aspiration? or Resolve?)
> Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound—
> And when I rose, I found myself in prayer. (*CW* 16: 819)

The song of bliss enacts a oneness without division, in which thought and one's whole being are absorbed, and the world is fully suspended, "hanging still." The listener is at once risen from this bliss—"we awaken from intellectual intuition," Schelling writes, "as from the state of death" (*Werke* 3: 94)—and remains *in* bliss *qua* immanent resurrection and salvation. It is a resolve (to be one in bliss, one with one's friend and companion, too) that finds its continuation in prayer, this a-worldly articulation that suspends the articulation of the world, a stillness expressed in words that the world cannot capture, a deliverance from the world that is neither religious nor secular. Certainly, after all, *the world must not be*—such is the central Romantic resolve. This resolve, however,

runs against the resolve of the modern world to be, to reproduce itself, to expand. In the end, this cannot but lead to a violent clash.

3. Acosmic/A cosmic bliss

> Ah! was that bliss
> Feared as an alien, and too vast for man? (Coleridge)

One should not be deceived by the serenity of bliss, just as the power of the ocean is not diminished by the serenity of its blueness. Bliss is inhuman ("alien") and "too vast for man," as Coleridge writes, since the immanent vastness of bliss precedes and exceeds the logic of human self-assertion or the modern Western definition of "man."[9] The world, compared to this vastness, appears as but a "bubble" (*CW* 16: 655). Whoever perceives the blended all-oneness of bliss simply as gladness fails to see the abyss it opens up, which swallows the finite world and the finite self. Arguably, one reason why Romanticism embraces nature as the site of bliss has to do with the fact that there is an immense inhuman power in nature—its deep time and oceanic depths, its geological catastrophes and volcanic eruptions, its post-Copernican cosmic infinity—and this power cannot be exhausted by the modern logic of finitude. To inhabit this power immanently is to "cease to be a finite being" (Schelling, *Werke* 3: 79). As one with the entire post-Copernican and Anthropocenic nature, bliss cannot but be an alien bliss, and if the Romantics are capable of sensing it to be somehow deeply familiar, then this is because they feel this bliss to precede ontologically the negativity of the world, annulling the world's claims to primacy. What Schelling calls the "essence" of our soul, to which we are transported in intellectual intuition, is immediately one with the vastness of the universe, compared to which the world's demands appear insignificant. Perhaps it is that vastness, and not the world, that is our true home.

That bliss *precedes* this finite life of striving, is often indexed in Romanticism by the association of bliss with childhood, and with the figure of the child (as is so often the case in Wordsworth)—not as emblematic of the world's reproductive futurism, but as nonreproductive. The child is one in whom reflection and the toils of life have not yet severed the immediate connection to the primordial vastness of bliss. Childhood is a stage at which the human is at once less and, ontologically, infinitely *more* than the mature, delimited subject of self-assertion. In a way, the child is not of the world, and not yet in the world. That bliss *cancels out* this life, is indexed by the Romantic association of bliss with death. This death, however, is not the Darwinian or Kantian death as marking the subject's inescapable mortality, and thus part of the finite world's reproductive life/death binary. That bliss can be associated at once with the "one life" and with death is not a contradiction—since bliss collapses the binary of life and death just as it does with other binaries of the world, and since neither "life" nor "death" should be understood here in finite terms. If Schelling compares bliss to "the state of death," then this is because the one absolute being in which "infinite activity" coincides with "infinite repose," just like in Wordsworth's "one life," cannot but appear as *non-life* from the perspective of this finite life of division and striving. In bliss, absolute being is at the same time absolute nothingness, and vice versa. As the unification of the finite self with the All, it is no wonder that death comes to mark the undivision foreclosed by the world. "No more," writes Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Adonais*, a poem on the death of

Keats, "let Life divide what Death can join together" (506). Whatever one may call this absolute power of undivision, uniting the alienated soul with itself, with its lovers and companions, and (at the end of *Adonais*) with the infinite cosmic expanse, this power is absolutely antagonistic to finite life. Shelley's "*No more*" is also a resolve and a song ("whose might I have invoked in song" [507])—a declaration issued to and against the world.

That the state of bliss appears from the point of view of the world as either childhood bliss or the bliss of death, indexes the power of the world. The world seeks to re-mediate bliss into an inaccessible past bliss and a wished-for utopia of bliss to come in an indefinite future (as in Wordsworth's "I, long before the blessed hour arrives, / Would sing in solitude the spousal verse / Of this great consummation" [198]). Since bliss equals the end of the world, re-mediation of bliss is how the world survives. The risk of endorsing this re-mediation, as the Romantics sometimes do, is the risk of falling into endless approximation and theodicy. As soon as Romanticism enters into negotiations with the world instead of saying "No more" to it, the world takes over. One could read in this way Schelling's interpretation of the Fall (*Abfall*): the world imposes itself negatively on the immanence of bliss, enclosing, dividing, and re-mediating it. This means, however, that it is on the power of bliss that the power of the world lives and feeds, while seeking to conceal, defuse, and defer it. At the same time, the endless deferral of a fulfilled future has for its flip-side the fact that nature and bliss can never be exhausted by the world. Just as the modern world remains constitutively incomplete and not-yet, so the antagonistic utopic space of bliss also *remains*, preceding and exceeding the construction of the world.

In its essence, Romanticism is not an optimism, even during those moments where it seems to fall into theodicy. Romanticism can never fully place its faith in the world, but only in what is antagonistic towards it. However, this leads to an impasse.[10] Bliss seeks to annihilate the world—and yet the world is there. Therein lies ultimately what appears, from the perspective of the world in its ceaseless expansion, as the failure of Romantic bliss. With the waning of Romanticism, bliss becomes ever more spectral, and the clash between the spectrality of the world (declared by bliss to be unreal) and the spectrality of bliss (declared to be an illusion by the world) increasingly more violent, until it is resolved into the seeming victory of the negativity of the world over bliss in Hegel or Darwin.

Mary Shelley's novella *Matilda*, a story of an incestual love of a father for his daughter, in whom he finds the image of her long-dead mother, and who therefore rekindles in him again the one love of his life, brings to the surface the violence of the clash between the world and bliss. The father's return to Matilda, after a long disappearance from the face of the earth, turns him into a spectral embodiment of reproduction; he is not quite of this world anymore. At first, Matilda and her father experience the "Paradisaical bliss" of reunion, in a Romantic oneness with nature too (22). However, as the incestual character of his love is revealed, bliss is collapsed in a clash with the logic of reproduction. Reproduction here appears spectral—the father is a ghost come back to haunt the blissful figure of the child—so that the bliss of love becomes spectral too, but their clash is no less terrible because of that. In the transgressive transfer of love from mother to daughter, *Matilda* implies that, ontologically, there is only *one* bliss and *one* love—but the reproduction of the world intervenes and tears this oneness apart, creating a spectral doubling that turns into violence. How can the reproduction of the world not corrupt the

Schellingian all-unity of love? There is and can be no bliss in the world's reproductive futurism. To accept reproduction is to accept the world and repress true love; to attempt to affirm, in the face of the loss of love at the hands of the world, *both* reproduction and love—to affirm the spectral as the real—is to create terror and death. The frightful ambivalence of death in *Matilda* serves to underscore the simultaneous clash and entanglement between the Kantian-Darwinian (finite) and the Romantic (infinite) logics of death. Upon Matilda's fall from bliss, nature itself gets converted into a site of death: the sea in which the father drowns himself, the heath where Matilda becomes deadly ill, replace the earlier scenes of blissful nature. And yet, Matilda now herself welcomes death in its power of undivision. "In truth," she says, "I am in love with death." The shroud—"is it not my wedding dress?" (107). As Matilda's father put it, "futurity is dark" (10), despite the light of a better future promised by the world. However, it is for an absolute darkness that Matilda now longs—for the infinite night of the universe, "a universal death" (24) that *coincides* cosmically with the all-oneness of love foreclosed by the world.

What the Romantic longs for at the border between bliss and the world is a power that would be capable of overwhelming the world. In the face of the incessant global expansion of the world of modernity, bliss has to become even more expansive so as to surpass the power of the world. Hence the need, as it were, to upscale bliss, to make it planetary and cosmic. Thus, Schelling associates bliss not only with water but also with fire, corresponding respectively to the infinite passivity (all-dissolution) and infinite antagonistic activity (all-consumption) as the two immanent attributes of bliss. As clashing with the world of selfhood and the enclosure of being, divine oneness of bliss cannot but appear as the all-consuming and cleansing fire of divine wrath. This fire is cosmically identified by Schelling with the fire of the sun "sealed" within the earth's core—a cosmic "eternal fire" destined to erupt against the rigidity of the earth in a universal conflagration (*Werke* 12: 230). All fire is but immanently one—the atemporal *Ursubstanz* itself, the one "divine fire" consuming what seeks to foreclose it towards a "transfigured," blissful, "purified essence" (as *Clara* puts it [81]).

This, too, is an expression of the immense post-Copernican power of nature. In Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, the instability of the planet is embraced in its frightful power. Ultimately, it is the universe itself, the all-encompassing A = A, that constitutes for Schelling the highest blissful being. This being is precisely what Novalis longs for in *Hymns to the Night*, the pinnacle of the Romantic tendency to inhabit immanently the infinite void of the universe as blissful. The world of day, in its "busyness" and "unrest," seeks to "consume" the bliss of the night (14)—from which the poetic speaker, full of anxiety (*Angst*) and longing (*Sehnsucht*), awaits deliverance. The night brings a "heavenly freedom" (20), consuming in turn the burdens and exhaustions of the world from which gods have already fled—perhaps to the stars. At the same time, there is a deeper ambivalence to this longing for the universe as "our home" (20). This home is itself infinitely alien to human life as we know it, and so it cannot be claimed by us in this life, but only by "a new alien life" (28) at the end of the world.

Wordsworthian all-oneness of bliss also coincides at its limit with the cosmic expanse—so that, if in Novalis's *Hymns* the first movement of the poetic speaker is to turn away from the world, to leave it below, *The Prelude* ends with a movement away from the earth towards a cosmic infinity. It is from "the unwearied Heavens," far above the "prospect of

the world," that Wordsworth claims to have sung "this Song," that is, *The Prelude* itself as a song of bliss (588). The infinite universe fills, as Wordsworth writes in "Star Gazers," "the blissful mind" that "gazes" upon it with a bliss preceding infinitely the fever and noise of the world ("not of this noisy world, but silent and divine" [323]). Intuiting the universal void, "all at once," is likewise affirmed by Coleridge as infinitely blissful: "my eye shall dart thro' infinite expanse, / While Thought suspended lies in Rapture's blissful Trance" (16: 15). In an important way, then, the stars and the skies remain in modernity the symbol of truth—it is just that it is a very modern truth: of the infinite distance and alienness of the universe, of its indifference to the human, of gods who have fled, leaving the human to its longing for bliss at the border between the earth and the cosmic expanse.

The call of bliss is, in Romanticism, a cosmic call. This expresses not only the need to upscale bliss—but the fact that bliss is *already* immanently infinite, so that, when the infinite universe comes to reoccupy in modernity the infinity of God, bliss cannot but be associated with the immeasurable cosmic void, with a primordial cosmic immanence that precedes and exceeds the world. It has been suggested that Christianity's response to the Copernican revolution—this infinite dis-ordering, de-centering, and emptying-out of the hierarchized cosmos—consisted in the last desperate attempt to imagine a paradisal bliss "beyond" the material infinity of the universe.[11] Secular modernity's response, meanwhile, has consisted in dreams of mastering the new planetary and cosmic reality, converting it into order under the control of "man." Romantic bliss opposes both of these tendencies. Bliss is absolutely dis-orderly: there can be no ordering in bliss. Romantic longing for bliss is not the striving to turn the universe into an orderly, man-made garden, or to escape into an immaterial "beyond." It is the bliss of an immanent material inhabitation of this infinite universe as an absolute freedom from the world, without the striving for mastery and control. Can this material void itself be the garden? Can this alien universe already be our home? Is this perhaps the only "truth *an sich*" that remains in the post-Copernican age? If so, then Romanticism can never really fail—but is destined to keep erupting against the imposition of the world.

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Notes

1. A highly Rousseauian scene.
2. For an elaboration of these logics of modernity through a critical Blumenbergian framework, see Albernaz and Chepurin. The term "self-assertion," which I use throughout this essay, belongs to Blumenberg.
3. To use Schelling's and Wordsworth's terms, respectively.
4. See Chepurin.
5. My use of the terms "common" and "undivided" to characterize Schellingian immanence is indebted to my conversations with Joseph Albernaz. See also Albernaz.
6. Importantly, Schelling understands love as a cosmic force, so that his 1809 *Freedom* essay affirms apocalyptically an all-oneness of love. This is also a (cosmic) scene of bliss.

7. A technical clarification is perhaps in order. The striving of nature is, of course, a central Romantic motif—but it should be grasped alongside the idea of natural bliss as refusing all striving. Thus, in Schelling, nature's restless striving marks its thirsting for bliss from within the unblissful division of principles or forces that constitutes finitude. In its ceaseless productivity, writes Schelling in 1800, nature seeks to regain, from within "absolute split [*Entzweiung*]," the "absolute identity" from which it has fallen—since in its essence nature remains "an abyss of repose [*Ruhe*] and inactivity" (*Werke* 8: 327). Nature seeks to produce absolute identity, but is doomed to (re)produce finite, particular identities. We may see these identities as the overabundance of natural forms, but behind it lies a constitutive unblissfulness, an endless craving that cannot be sated, leading the later Schelling to speak of the melancholy of nature. The tragic irony of all finite productivity—a highly modern motif—is that it is driven by the desire to be free of productivity, to achieve the non-alienation and fulfillment that are, however, foreclosed by the ontological constitution of productivity itself. The "potencies" (that is, levels or stages) of nature form for Schelling the structure of finitude's approximation of bliss from within *Entzweiung*. Water and fire, as states of absolute identity, are the only states in which the divided structure of natural productivity and striving is immanently dissolved or consumed. Hence the importance of water and fire in Schellingian (and not only Schellingian) imagery of bliss.
8. See Berlant.
9. For a key critique of the co-imbrication between modernity and "man," see Wynter.
10. At the same time, as Rei Terada notes in her essay on Keats and the "intolerability of the present" as the unassimilable Romantic starting point, "the impasse is a kind of barricade" (280).
11. Horkheimer 315.

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