

*Günther Blaicher
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(eds.)*

Romantic Continuities

*Papers delivered at the Symposium
of the 'Gesellschaft für englische Romantik'
held at the Catholic University of Eichstätt
(October 1990)*



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Christoph Bode (*Kiel*)

Romanticism and Deconstruction: Distant Relations and Elective Affinities

I Introduction

This essay is about certain affinities between English Romanticism and American deconstruction with regard to ideas on the relation of language and thought. I shall limit myself to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley on the one hand, because they, in addition to their outstanding poetical achievements, went furthest in formulating a Romantic poetics, and, on the other hand, to the first-generation American deconstructors, i.e. Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, the late Paul de Man, plus Jacques Derrida as their spiritual godfather and - despite his own protestations that he has "no relation whatsoever" to deconstruction (Salusinszky 68) - the self-styled critical maverick, Harold Bloom.

It could of course be objected that English Romanticism had no coherent, monolithic poetics to which all Romantics could subscribe and that it is also by no means certain whether the above-named academics hold enough in common to be regarded as a school of criticism (they themselves have variously denied and admitted a congruence of their views). The objection is valid in a way, and I would go even further and say that ideally one would have to trace in each case - Romantics and deconstructors - the development of their ideas on language and thinking before one could attempt a reasonable comparison or even establish a tie-in of the two camps. But this work has already been done by others, and I am confident that on the basis of it generalization *is* possible, at least in the particular field I have singled out for discussion because it seems to be quintessential both to Romanticism and deconstruction.

The connection between Romanticism and American deconstruction is, as has been noted oftentimes before, conspicuously strong and it is evident even on a very superficial level: except for Miller, who specializes in Victorian fiction, all the first-generation American deconstructors are primarily experts in Romanticism. Indeed, so strong is the association that Arden Reed, in his introduction to a critical anthology on *Romanticism and Language*, found it necessary to state that "Deconstruction, however, has no exclusive claim to the topic of Romanticism and language" (18). And yet, when J. Hillis Miller was asked at a symposium on deconstruction in 1984, "Do you have any particular thoughts on why deconstruction in America has caught on at first primarily among the Victorians and people working in Romantic poetry?", he feigned ignorance and answered,

"Has it? I don't know. Probably purely historical accident" (in Davis/Schleifer, eds., 87). It is my purpose here to show that this is not so, that it is not mere coincidence and that there are good reasons for this mutual attraction - of Romanticists to deconstruction and of deconstructors to Romanticism.

But is it an attraction based on similarities or on differences? Do deconstructors find something congenial in Romantic literature (so, for example, Grabes, who gives a sophisticated if somewhat cynical reading of their motives) - or do they turn to it because these texts promise, at first sight, the necessary resistance to their deconstructive moves, without which the whole manuvre would be pointless (see, for example, Johnston et al., eds., XIV)?

In a contribution to a symposium on paradox, held at this university three months ago, I argued the latter.¹ I took the line that deconstruction, as a highly paradoxical discourse, turns away from modernist and so-called postmodernist literature because that kind of literature displays its own paradoxicality to such a degree that there is nothing left for deconstruction to do. These texts playfully deconstruct themselves. Bereft of the necessary difference or contrast between itself and its material, deconstruction therefore prefers to operate its stratagems on a discursive material that looks less like itself. Paradox flees paradox, I argued then, and the motto could have been, "opposites attract". Today, I'll argue the obverse: I'll argue that in the central field of ideas on language and thought Romanticism and deconstruction do share basic convictions; that, because of this, they also face similar problems; that, in a way, American deconstruction can be regarded as a late offshoot of European Romanticism and that therefore its critical preoccupation with Romanticism is, as I said above, by no means pure coincidence, but an elective affinity actively pursued by the practitioners of deconstruction. In short, my motto for today is, "birds of a feather flock together", and I hope that at the end of this and in conjunction with what I said here in July, it will be clear that - as in real life - the linkage and attraction between deconstruction and Romanticism is all the stronger for its being founded both on similarities and on differences.

II Language as the medium of thought

In his superb study *The Art of Poetry 1750-1820*, P.W.R. Stone writes that "the Romantic revolution was primarily a revolution in ideas about *how* poetry functions and *how* it is written" (135) and he identifies as the decisive shift of

1 Christoph Bode, "Das Paradox in post-mimetischer Literatur und post-strukturalistischer Literaturtheorie", *Das Paradoxon: Zur geschichtlichen Entfaltung einer Stil- und Denkform*, ed. Roland Hagenbüchle, Tübingen: Narr, to be published in early 1991.

paradigm in this revolution the turning away from the neo-classical conviction that language is the dress of thought (cf. Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, "expression is the dress of thought"). No longer do the Romantics believe that tropes and figures can be added as adornments to a central core of meaning which remains basically unaltered and unaffected by these rhetorical trappings: the same idea, the Romantics contend, *cannot* be expressed in various ways and still remain the same idea. The Romantics bid adieu to the dualistic view of "ideas clothed in suitable language" and insist that the two - language and thinking - are inseparably connected. The expression of an idea is not accessory to it (Stone 50), nor is language extraneous to thinking. Rather, language is the very medium in which thinking takes place. Language is the way in which we conceive the world, it is the manifestation of our relation to it.

This shift of paradigm in poetics is so well-documented and convincingly expounded by Stone that I need hardly adduce further evidence for it. What I shall do instead is delineate some of the consequences, both positive and negative, promising and disturbing, this change in outlook had for the Romantic poets.

First, if language is the medium of thought and the manifestation of our being-in-the-world, then its state is also indicative of the state of society at any given time (cf. Humboldt: "Die Sprache ist durchaus kein bloßes Verständigungsmittel, sondern der Abdruck des Geistes und der Weltansicht der Redenden."). Criticism of the one implies criticism of the other, and *vice versa*. Therefore, it is only consequent that Wordsworth, at the beginning of his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, says that

it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which, again, could not be determined, without pointing out in what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other, and without retracing the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself. (1: 121)

Against this backdrop, his decision to revert to "the real language of men" is a move in cultural politics,² directed against those whose mistaken belief in the

² It is well known that Coleridge was highly critical of what he deemed to be a certain naiveté on the part of his friend. In the conspectus to chapter 17 of his *Biographia Literaria* he wrote, "*Rustic life (above all, low and rustic life) especially unfavourable to the formation of a human diction - The best parts of language the product of philosophers, not clowns or shepherds*", and then elaborated: "It is, moreover, to be considered that to the formation of healthy feelings, and a reflecting mind, *negations* involve impediments not less formidable, than sophistication and vicious intermixture. I am convinced, that for the human soul to prosper in rustic life, a certain vantage-ground is pre-requisite. It is not every man that is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labours. Education, or original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist, if the changes, forms, and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant. And where these are not sufficient, the mind contracts and hardens by want of

separateness of language and thought spreads corruption, as he points out in his third "Essay on Epitaphs":

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (...) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (2: 84/85)

It is only because expressions are "not what the garb is to the body, but what the body is to the soul" (2: 84), that an enormous responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the poet: As expressions are a "constituent part and power or function in the thought" (2: 84), poetry - as language at its most "languy" - is seen as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge", or "the first and last of all knowledge",

stimulants; and the man becomes selfish, sensual, gross, and hard-hearted. (...) Whatever may be concluded on the other side, from the stronger local attachments and enterprising spirit of the Swiss, and other mountaineers, applies to a particular mode of pastoral life, under forms of property, that permit and beget manners truly republican, not to rustic life in general, or to the absence of artificial cultivation. On the contrary the mountaineers, whose manners have been so often eulogized, are in general better educated and greater readers than men of equal rank elsewhere. But where this is not the case, as among the peasantry of North Wales, the ancient mountains, with all their terrors and all their glories are pictures to the blind, and music to the deaf (2: 44,45).⁷ In other words, Coleridge admits the *potential* but insists that there must be additional conditions fulfilled before this potential can be *realized*. As long as these conditions are not given, "the best part of human language" as a sign system whose capability depends on differentiation and refinement (cf. my second point, below) is to be found not in rustic life but elsewhere: "(...) if to communicate with an object implies such an acquaintance with it, as renders it capable of being discriminately reflected on; the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary. The few things, and modes of action, requisite for his bodily conveniences, would alone be individualized; while all the rest of nature would be expressed by a small number of confused, general terms. Secondly, I deny that the words and combinations of words derived from the objects, with which the rustic is familiar, whether with distinct or confused knowledge, can be justly said to form the *best* part of language. It is more than probable, that many classes of the brute creation possess discriminating sounds, by which they can convey to each other notices of such objects as concern their food, shelter, or safety. Yet we hesitate to call the aggregate of such sounds a language, otherwise than metaphorically. The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imagination and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed or reaped. (2: 53/54)." Wordsworth, obviously, is far more concerned about the *general* drift of society as reflected in its language, whereas Coleridge has no illusions about pockets of unalienated, uncorrupted language. But despite their differences in this point, both share the basic conviction that language and thinking are virtually inseparable (for Coleridge's view cf. Goodson).

and consequently the poet, in an age of linguistic and social alienation, becomes "the rock of defence for human nature" (1: 141):

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unsuiting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (1: 129)

The same idea of poetry as an antidote to alienation is elaborated in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*.

Second, if thinking takes place in language and poetry is a way of thinking, then the poet's occupation is never a merely defensive one. Working in language, he is forever refining and differentiating its possibilities by refining and differentiating its organization. Forever pushing the borders of what can be said, he, at the same time, expands the realms of what can be thought, perceived and imagined. In this sense, all Romantic poetry is border poetry - it is engaged in the dialectics that mediates between the sayable and the yet unsayable (see Frank, *Das Sagbare*): By converting the latter into the former, it constantly re-defines the frontiers of our universe of discourse and knowledge (see Frank, *Frühromantische Ästhetik* 24, on Heidegger: "Das Kunstwerk erschließt uns eine Welt des noch nicht Gesagten") and thereby contributes to the giant poem which is the history of the evolution of mankind and consciousness.³

Certainly the idea that the world is nature's laboratory for bringing about consciousness, which then, reflexively applied to itself, ascends and expands in ever widening circles, is most pertinent in Shelley, all the way from *Queen Mab* to *Defence of Poetry*, which idealistically prefigures Marx's "Die Bildung der fünf Sinne ist eine Arbeit der ganzen bisherigen Weltgeschichte" (1: 119).

But when Coleridge and Wordsworth decided to split up their task in the *Lyrical Ballads* - Coleridge showing the penetration of the supernatural into the ordinary, Wordsworth presenting "ordinary things (...) to the mind in an unusual

³ This idea that language is an evolving system, forever differentiating itself, seems to go back to Condillac (cf. Aarsleff, *Study of Language*, and From *Locke* to *Saussure*). Cf. also A.W. Schlegel, *Über Literatur* 96, 97: "Die Sprache ist kein Produkt der Natur, sondern ein Abdruck des menschlichen Geistes, der darin die Entstehung und Verwandtschaft seiner Vorstellungen und den ganzen Mechanismus seiner Operationen niederlegt. Es wird also in der Poesie schon Gebildetes wieder gebildet; und die Bildsamkeit ihres Organs ist ebenso grenzenlos als die Fähigkeit des Geistes zur Rückkehr auf sich selbst durch immer höhere potenzierte Reflexionen. (...) Ja, man kann ohne Übertreibung und Paradoxe sagen, daß eigentlich alle Poesie, Poesie der Poesie sei; denn sie setzt schon die Sprache voraus, deren Erfindung doch der poetischen Anlage angehört, die selbst ein immer werdendes, sich verwandelndes, nie vollendetes Gedicht des gesamten Menschengeschlechtes ist."

aspect" (1: 123, cf. also Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* Ch. 14) -, they both subscribed to the same Romantic aesthetics as Shelley did, viz. essentially an aesthetics of defamiliarization:

And therefore is it the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than bodily convalescence. (Coleridge 1:81)

(Cf. Novalis: "Die Kunst, auf angenehme Art zu befremden, einen Gegenstand fremd zu machen und doch bekannt und anziehend, das ist die romantische Poetik.")

It is extremely important to note that a poetics of defamiliarization makes sense only if one believes in the power of language to restructure the world for us, to be cognitively *productive* through linguistic innovation. In the beginning, thus Shelley in *Defence of Poetry*, all language was poetry, but its association continually lost freshness through habitual use. Poets work against this tendency towards automatization (cf. Novalis again: "Alle Poesie unterbricht den gewöhnlichen Zustand, das gemeine Leben, fast wie der Schlummer, um uns zu erneuern und so unser Lebensgefühl immer rege zu halten.") and marvellously in this process more is gained than lost: "[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (Shelley 282). The unprecedented notion of "*poetic* thought" is correlative to the idea of language as the medium of thinking. Coleridge's strictures on Pope - "the matter and diction seemed to me characterized not so much by poetic thoughts as by thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry" (1: 19) - presuppose that *original* thinking can only take place on the outskirts of what has already been said. True poetry is *beyond* what has been articulated up till now, and therefore - because it is radically and irreducibly new and different and could not be said otherwise - it cannot be retranslated into "other words of the same language" (Coleridge 1: 23) without loss of meaning. This insight into the essential untranslatability of poetry forms the backbone of the Romantic theory of organic form. The indissoluble relation between part and whole of a text corresponds to the same intimate coupling of language and thought: "(...) it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out of the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (...) without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say" (Coleridge 1: 23).

But if language is productive and not merely reproductive, if it structures the world for us and - *via* poetry - opens up new possibilities of looking at it, then it becomes understandable why, for Shelley at least, a new flowering of literature is a sign of an approaching social revolution (cf. Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* and *Defence of Poetry*). As all true poetry is directed towards what is not yet, it is intrinsically prophetic; and as it is its supreme task to bring into existence what is not yet there, it is only legitimate to extend the meaning of the word "poetry" and apply it synecdochically to all creation:

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. (...) [For] Poets (...) are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the *institutors of laws*, and the *founders of civil society* and the *inventors of the arts of life and teachers*, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. (...) Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withdraws from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. (Shelley 294, 279, 293)

When Coleridge characterizes the primary imagination "as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (1: 304), he points to the same continuity of the poetic-creative principle.⁴

Third, the idea of language as the medium of thought is concomitant with a new epistemology. Just as language and thought are seen as inseparable, so mind and reality are conceived of as being dialectically entwined in a continual process of interchange: Cognition is the confluence of mind and external world (cf. Hartman, *Unmediated Vision* 25, 26). And if it is rewarding to listen in "a wise passiveness" to "this mighty sum of things for ever speaking" (Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply") and to cultivate "a heart that watches and receives" ("The Tables Turned"), this is only because "man and nature [are] essentially adapted to each other" (Wordsworth 1:140) and because the eternal language of nature corresponds to something in man that strives to realize itself:

(...) so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely sounds and shapes intelligible
Of the eternal language, which thy God

4

Cf. F.Schlegel: "Es gibt (...) eine Art des Denkens, die etwas produziert und daher mit dem schöpferischen Vermögen, das wir dem Ich der Natur und dem Welt-Ich zuschreiben, große Ähnlichkeit der Form hat. Das Dichten nämlich; dies erschafft gewissermaßen seinen Stoff selbst." Or Novalis: "Dichtkunst ist wohl nur willkürlicher, tätiger, produktiver Gebrauch unserer Organe - und vielleicht wäre Denken selbst nicht viel etwas anderes - und Denken und Dichten also einerlei." Both quoted in Benjamin 63, 64 resp.

Utters, who from eternity doth teach
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.
 (Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight")

It is true that intermittently in Wordsworth we still find the image of the mind as a mere mirror of external reality (so, for example, in the continuation of the passage just quoted from the *Preface*). But that is a mechanistic residue. Increasingly, the *dialectical* nature of perception and understanding is foregrounded. See, for example:

(...) all the mighty world
 of eye and ear, - both what they half create,
 And what perceive (...)
 (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey")

Or in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", when the fluttering film of soot is depicted as

(...) a companionable form
 Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
 By its own moods interprets, everywhere
 Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
 And makes a toy of thought.

Or, finally in Shelley's "Mont Blanc":

My own, my human mind, which passively
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
 With the clear universe of things around

- a seeming subordination of the mind, which is dialectically overturned in the last three lines of the poem:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 If to the human mind's imaginings
 Silence and solitude were vacancy?

The human mind does not create the outer world, but it structures it and invests it with meaning, so that "nothing exists but as it is perceived" (Shelley 173). This, however, brings about some problems and I will now turn to the more disturbing consequences of "language as the medium of thought". If language and thought are coextensive, if we live in a linguistic universe that defines and prestructures our experience, how can we ever be sure that what we know is

"really" true and not just a subjective (or collective) delusion? How can we ever know what lies outside the scope of language and beyond the pale of expression? If all is language and there is no outside to language that one could express, then the moment of terrible truth is finally there: It is the moment when the Romantics' excessive pan-lingualism - and I should say any pan-lingualism - collapses into utter linguistic and epistemological scepticism and doubt, the moment our linguistic universe is recognized to be what it "really" is: a prison-house to which we are confined. The next part deals with attempts to break out.

III The limits of expression

If all Romantic poetry is, in a way, border poetry, forever working on the limits of expression and converting the not yet sayable into the sayable, then it is well prepared, even predestined to engage in the absolute. For the Romantics, it was poetry rather than philosophy, let alone science, that could attempt the impossible: to bring back that which is *by definition* outside its realm (cf. F. Schlegel: "Die Nichterkennbarkeit des Absoluten ist also eine identische Trivialität", quoted in Frank, *Frühromantische Ästhetik* 158) into the world of discourse, to represent the infinite in finite terms. If the infinite and absolute can by definition never be presented or expressed *as it is*, then all presentation of it must be *allegorical* (cf. F. Schlegel: "Das Höchste kann man eben, weil es unaussprechlich ist, nur allegorisch sagen", quoted in Hörisch 160). Poetry, and by extension all art, is allegorical of the absolute in that it is a) essentially inexhaustible by interpretation ("Die unausschöpfliche Sinnfülle ist Allegorie des Unbegreiflichen." Frank, *Das Sagbare* 158), and b) always in the state of becoming, so that it always points *beyond itself* (F. Schlegel, *Schriften* 37, 38: "Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie. [...] Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann."). Poetry thematizes, as Schlegel says, the impossibility *and* necessity to depict the absolute, to utter the unutterable in spite of all (cf. Frank, *Frühromantische Ästhetik* 364). Knowing what it does, it self-reflexively becomes a medium for the absolute (cf. Behler, "Kunst der Reflexion" 219, Benjamin 37): "[Es ist] nur poetisch darüber noch sinnvoll zu reden, worüber szientifisch nur zu schweigen wäre." (F. Schlegel quoted in Hörisch 89). "Es ist in Erinnerung zu bringen, daß die Notwendigkeit der Poesie sich auf das Bedürfnis gründet, welches aus der Unvollkommenheit der Philosophie hervorgeht, das Un-endliche darzustellen." (F. Schlegel quoted in Frank, *Frühromantische Ästhetik* 306). "Wo die Philosophie aufhört, muß die Poesie anfangen." (ibid.). Manfred Frank summarizes: "Nur der Kunst gelingt das

Unmögliche, ein Un- darstellbares dennoch darzustellen, und zwar in seiner Understellbarkeit." (*Frühromantische Ästhetik* 158).

For reasons of time and space, I reluctantly refrain from discussing in this context the importance of the Romantic theory of symbols - as the language of transcendental truth - and the concept of Romantic irony as an indispensable part of a poetics and a literary mode "that draws attention to its own limitations" (Mellor, *Irony* 25, see also McFarland, *Romanticism*, Mellor, "Irony", and Simpson, *Irony*). Suffice it here to say that "the whole invoked by the symbol" or allegory remains, of course, "impenetrable" (McFarland, *Romanticism* 33) and that sometimes the irony turns bitter (or exists only in the eye of the beholder).

What I shall do instead is sketch briefly three other forms in which the Romantic desire for totality and the absolute, for "unmediated vision" (Hartman), ultimately manifests itself as failure and deficiency, three forms in which we see that the highest demands the Romantics had on language resulted, for them, primarily in an awareness of the poverty and inadequacy of their expressions (cf. Gleckner). The first form is the poetry of marking time (the ambiguity is deliberate) as we find it in Wordsworth, the second is the poetry of despair and fragmentation, as in Coleridge, and the third a poetry perpetually reaching out and overreaching itself, as in Shelley.

Wordsworth's theory of poetic creation, as you all know, attaches highest importance to the poet's subjectivity. But it is exactly because creativity is founded on subjectivity that it is extremely vulnerable and constantly endangered. If poetry depends on the capacity to experience intensely certain spots of time, to recollect and relive that emotion in tranquillity and finally to find expression for it, then the creative process may break down at any of the three points - and it does: First goes the capacity to experience "unmediatedly", then the capacity to at least revive those past experiences, then, inevitably, because the ground is lacking, the gift of words. A poet thus practising his art lives, as Basil Willey once observed, on capital.

It has been said that "subjectivity or self-consciousness is the salient problem of Romanticism" (Bloom in Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness* 1). It is, in a double sense: "Wordsworth", writes Geoffrey Hartman, "cannot find his [great objective] theme because he already has it: himself." (in Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness* 53); or, more drastically, in Bloom's words, "Wordsworth's Copernican revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what a poem is 'about'" (*Romanticism and Consciousness* 8). Therefore, it is so extremely significant, indeed paradigmatic, that Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the poem on the growth of his own mind, is not a prelude at all, but turns out to be the main thing, not the ante-chapel, but already the cathedral. The two-faced problem is that once you root your poetry firmly in your

subjectivity, there is, practically speaking, *no other subject*, nothing to follow, because whatever you thematize will be that something in relation to your subjectivity; and, second, the resulting poetry must be one of loss, it must be retrospective and consumptive. Heaven lies in infancy, growing up is growing less and offers small recompense, despite the poet's interspersed protestations to the contrary:

It is not now as it hath been of yore; -
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.
(...)

(...) I know, where'er I go,
That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.
(...)
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
(*"Ode: Intimations of Immortality"*)

Wordsworth begins with radical subjective idealism:

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. (Preface to "Ode: Intimations of Immortality")⁵

Then there are his attempts at the absolute, epiphany, moments when he looks into the life of things, has a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, thoughts too deep for tears, and when he knows that "our destiny (...) Is with infinitude, and only there." (*Prelude* [1850] VI, ll. 605/606). But in the end, *contrary* to all these attempts at verbally conjuring up a sense of the absolute, yet represented as the *culmination* of all these attempts, we are given the following in the very last lines of the *Prelude*: in looking back a prospect of

(...) how the mind of Man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth

⁵ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted in Geier 177: "Ich kann mir wohl denken, was Heidegger mit Sein und Angst meint. Der Mensch hat den Trieb, gegen die Grenzen der Sprache anzurennen. Denken Sie z.B. an das Erstaunen, daß etwas existiert. Das Erstaunen kann nicht in Form einer Frage ausgedrückt werden, und es gibt auch gar keine Antwort. Alles, was wir sagen mögen, kann a priori nur Unsinn sein. Trotzdem rennen wir gegen die Grenze der Sprache an. Dieses Anrennen hat auch Kierkegaard gesehen und es sogar ganz ähnlich (als Anrennen gegen das Paradoxon) bezeichnet. Aber die Tendenz, das Anrennen deutet auf etwas hin. Das hat schon der heilige Augustinus gewußt, wenn er sagt: 'Was, Du Mistvich, du willst keinen Unsinn reden? Rede nur einen Unsinn, es macht nichts.'"

On which he dwells, above this frame of things (...)
 In beauty exalted, as it is itself
 Of quality and fabric more divine
 (*Prelude* [1850] XIV, ll.450ff.)

It is, all trappings aside, the apotheosis of the human mind, of subjectivity.

In chapter 22 of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge lists the various defects of Wordsworth's poetry. Groups four and five are particularly interesting in this context:

[the fourth class of defects] are such as arise likewise from an intensity of feeling disproportionate to *such* knowledge and value of the objects described, as can be fairly anticipated of men in general, even of the most cultivated class. (...) In this class, I comprise occasional prolixity, repetition, and an eddying, instead of progression, of thought. (2: 136)

In other words, Wordsworth, so it seems to the reader, is *marking time*. Coleridge continues,

Fifth and last; thoughts and images too great for the subject. This is an approximation to what might be called *mental* bombast, as distinguished from verbal; for, as in the latter there is a disproportion of the expressions to the thoughts, so in this there is a disproportion of thought to the circumstance and occasion." (2: 136)

What Coleridge does not see is that Wordsworth's marking time and his mental and verbal bombast is *not a personal shortcoming*, but the inevitable effect (it would be wrong to only call it a side-effect) of a poetry yearning to say more than can actually be said. Lost for words, it rambles on. The fault is not individual, but systematic. But then, Coleridge was ever ready to see *personal* inadequacy, especially where he himself was concerned.

I will pass by "Dejection: An Ode" - that superb thematization of loss of creative power as personal fault ("I may not hope from outward forms to win/ The passion and the life, whose fountains are within./ O Lady! we receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does Nature live.") - and turn to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" instead, as befits the great fragmentarist (see again McFarland, *Romanticism*).

"Kubla Khan" - poem and preface - must be the ultimate document of the inevitable failure to transfer what is beyond conception back to everyday reality:

Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and song,
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me,

That with music loud and long,
 I would build that dome in air,
 That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
 And all who heard should see them there,
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,
 And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honeydew hath fed,
 And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(ll. 42ff.)

Threefold the poet is barred from success: He cannot revive the maiden's song and find those extraordinary expressions adequate to his vision; but even if he could, he would be more likely to cause consternation and fear and find himself in isolation from his public; and even if that would not preclude a partaking in the secondary vision of "all who heard" - there would always be, back in reality, a visitor from Porlock, annihilating the greatest part of what was salvaged. If the neighbour from Porlock is not Romanticism's most impressive personification of the reality principle, then he is at least its greatest bogeyman: To all intents, he never existed, and the causes of Romantic fragmentation are elsewhere to be found - they are inherent and implied in the poetic philosophy of "language as the medium of thought".

And so are the causes of a poetry that

frequently attempts to describe that which is beyond description - a depth beyond depth, a height beyond height, a timelessness beyond time, a boundless space, all the features of a universe which we can stretch to imagine but cannot satisfactorily find words to compass. (...) a poetry which moves with great speed; its characteristic effects are not those of logic or fixed clarity, but of a changing sensibility confronting an ever-changing world. It is a fitting poetry for an age of relativity: poet, reader, subject, engage in an endless process of interaction (Watson 225) -

it is, of course, the poetry of P.B. Shelley. There is probably no other Romantic poet in whom we witness such a fascinating struggle with language in order to wrest new meaning from it. Here is language in the making. Knowing that the poet's language is vitally metaphorical (cf. Shelley 278) but also that "language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relation to thoughts alone" (279),⁶ he staked all on figural mobility, neologisms and endlessly cascading periods of

⁶ The idea that language consists of *arbitrary* signs seems to have been extremely troubling to Coleridge, cf. his letter to Godwin, quoted in Jonathan Wordsworth 218: "Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? and how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? (...) [You should] endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of *words* and *things*, elevating, as it were, words into things, and living things too."

speech (see Hogle) to dynamize and set in motion his linguistic universe. In all this, Shelley saw that "What thou *art* we know not", but kept asking, "What is most *like* thee?" ("To a Skylark", emphasis added) and piled simile upon simile, forever circumscribing, forever encircling the elusive inexpressible.

The enormous tension in Romantic poetics becomes apparent when the poet is seen as an active agent, an unacknowledged legislator, on the one hand, and as a mere instrument - preferably a lyre or Aeolian harp - on the other. Submission and hybris are intractably intertwined, and so are impotence and omnipotence. In *Prometheus Unbound*, it is Demogorgon who speaks the verdict on poetry's endeavours to reach the absolute:

(...) If the Abyss
Could vomit forth its secrets: - but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless (II, ll. 114-116).

And yet, in "Hymn of Apollo", Shelley could write of the god of poetry and the arts,

I am the eye with which the universe
beholds itself and knows itself divine;
All harmony of instrument or verse,
All prophecy, all medicine is mine,
All light of art or nature; - to my song
Victory and praise in its own right belong.

Up till now I hope to have shown that the successes and failures of the Romantic poets can be regarded as direct results of their ideas on the relation of language and thought, and in particular that the resulting paradoxes, aporias and contradictions were inevitable in the sense that they could by no means have been avoided once this view had been adopted, stopping short of not thinking it through at all. This is Goethe:

"Wie hast du's denn so weit gebracht?
Sie sagen, du habest es gut vollbracht!"
Mein Kind! ich hab' es klug gemacht,
Ich habe nie über das Denken gedacht. (1: 329)

The deconstructors, to whom I now turn, think a lot about thinking and language, but they have also got very far, in academic circles at least.

IV Deconstruction

If language is, as de Saussure taught, all form and no substance, a system of differences without positive terms, then meaning can never simply be "there", it is an effect "of an endless play of signifiers that refer not to signifieds but to other

"signifiers" (Lawson 98). The whole dynamic structure could only be arrested and meaning could only be fixed, if there were a stable centre whose meaning did not depend on its relations to other signs, but was *given* as a self-defining origin, "meaningful in itself" (Moi 106). Of course, argues Derrida, there is no such thing. There is no centre to language and thought that is unconditionally there, no "transcendental signifier" that stands *outside* the relativistic cosmos of language and is thereby the foundation and guarantor for stable meaning.

Yet the history of Western metaphysics, claims Derrida, is a history of attempts to *center* the structure, to name an origin: "essence, existence, substance, subject, *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, man and so forth." (Derrida in Davis, ed., 482). Deconstruction is a way to show that these attempts won't do, that whenever a privileged, purportedly self-defining sign is set up, it cannot help but subliminally speak about its "other", which is suppressed or denigrated, but inevitably steals back into the discourse. "Deconstruction", says Raman Selden, "locate[s] the moment when a text *transgresses the laws it appears to set up for itself*. At this point texts go to pieces, so to speak" (Selden 87). Or, in Hilary Lawson's words, "Deconstruction, at its simplest, consists of reading a text so closely that the conceptual distinctions, on which the text relies, are shown to fail on account of the inconsistent and paradoxical employment of these very concepts within the text as a whole. Thus the text is seen to fall by its own criteria - the standards or definitions which the text sets up are used reflexively to unsettle and shatter the original distinctions" (93).

Historically, the moment the centre is revealed as a *function* only, no "real" presence, a kind of linguistic involution takes place. For lack of a transcendental signifier, *everything becomes discourse* (see Derrida in Davis, ed., 482). "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte", there is no outside the text (Derrida, *Grammatologie* 274) because it has no identifiable limits. The limit you could identify by language would be no limit.

This linguistic turn has a number of far-reaching consequences. The first is that even seemingly stable notions like the subject or the self have to be conceived of as effects of an ultimately linguistic structure; as J. Hillis Miller says, "the self is a function primarily of language" (in Fischer/Eaves, eds., 124). Once this is accepted it is only consequential to profess, as Derrida did, "I don't believe in perception" (in Davis, ed., 497) or, "*I* do not select. The interpretations select themselves" (Kearns/Newton 21) or to say, as Geoffrey Hartman does,

(...) what survives in this graveyard of meanings is not simply a will, but specifically the *will to write*. (...) Language itself, nothing else, or the Nothing that is language, is the motivating residue. Despite obsolete and atrophied words,

and falsified, disputable, or undecidable meanings, the will to write persists.
(Saving XXIV)

But doesn't that sound suspiciously like a new absolute point of reference - language "as such"? It does, and it indicates the second consequence: the centre is only a function, agreed, but it is virtually indispensable (cf. Derrida in Davis, ed., 497). Not only must the deconstructor make use of the very system of thought and language that he sets out to deconstruct - there is no other -, not only must he engage in the terms he means to discredit, but there is always the imminent and inescapable danger of "centring" one's own discourse, so that it becomes itself an object for further deconstructions, or deconstructs itself. Deconstruction is an inherently paradoxical enterprise. When it succeeds, it fails, and its failure is its ultimate success. Deconstruction turns language against itself (cf. Norris, *Deconstruction* 18ff.) and it turns metaphysical thinking against itself. It is confined to the very language and concepts it seeks to disparage and knows to be delusory (Derrida in Davis, ed., 482/483: "*There is no sense* in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language - no syntax and no lexicon - which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulation of precisely what it seeks to contest").

Good deconstructive readings show in how far concrete texts are self-contradictory and, what is more, point to the fact that they cannot help but be so - but these readings claim no privileged status for themselves, they do not claim to have escaped the prison-house of language, to have found a ground beyond language where its conditions are not in force. "Deconstruction", says J. Hillis Miller, "does not promise liberation from that famous prison house of language, only a different way of living within it" ("Theory and Practice" 612/613). In deconstruction we encounter, for a second time now, the ultimate paradox or aporia of an excessive pan-lingualism or pan-textualism (see, for example, Hartman, "Communication" 16: "Imagine a world in which you cannot think except by reading and writing. That is our world."), the paradox that becomes apparent the moment when "all is language" or "we know only through language" is recognized to entail "it doesn't allow us to step outside, to see things as they 'really' are", the moment when the all-encompassing power of language and reason can only be used to express their utter impotence: We can never know what "really" is the case - but that, at least, we know. Again, cheerful optimism collapses into utter linguistic and epistemological scepticism. If meaning is only "inside" a system and is only an effect of a structure perpetually deferring closure, then - and this brings me to the third consequence - meaning is ultimately *undecidable*, and the office of the critic can only be to trace its trace and to show how texts necessarily deny what they assert. Always looking

for that "excess over assigned meaning" (Hartman in Bloom et al. VII), deconstruction becomes what Paul Ricur once called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (cf. Davis/Schleifer, eds., 80): No text means only what it says, nor does it even mean what it says. What a field day for interpreters!

If all texts contain a plurality of meanings and, what is more, meanings that cancel each other out, then reading in the sense of "a single, definitive, univocal interpretation" (Miller, "Host" 447) becomes an impossibility. If all readings are impositions, then there can only be misreadings, *doubly* in error: "all readings are in error because they assume" - in addition to that of their texts - "their own readability" (de Man, *Allegories* 202). The idea of the "unreadability" or "undecidability" of texts is one that all American deconstructors subscribe to. It derives only in part from the Derridean line of thought I gave you above, but in addition it draws heavily on Nietzsche's scepticist discussion of the irreducible figurality and rhetoricity of language, as presented, for example, in "*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*". This point is of extreme importance here because Nietzsche's famous answer to "Was ist Wahrheit?" -

Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münze in Betracht kommen (4: 546). -

this answer, I say, insists on the unattainability of truth through language *on account of* its inherent figurality: There is *only* interpretation, because all language is irreducibly "uneigentlich". The prison-house of language is locked *twice*. Or, to couch it in the classic Zen koan, "The word that you can say is not the Word."

This has two momentous consequences for deconstructive criticism: If language is tropical and rhetorical through and through (cf. de Man in Sacks, ed.), then it is fatuous to draw a dividing line between literature and commentary and to assign to one discourse exclusively the feature both ineradicably share. As "literary" texts deconstruct themselves ("Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction." de Man, "Semiology" 32), deconstructive commentary accompanies them and assimilates itself to them - it crosses a border that was illusory all along (see de Man, "Semiology", Hartman, "Crossing Over").

The second consequence is that the impasse of figurality brings up the problem of referentiality again: If the referential function of language in general is more of a problem than a solid stepping stone, it would be all the more absurd to analyze poetic texts under their "referential" aspect, whatever that may be. The genuine

study of literary texts, so the deconstructors, can only mean an elucidation of their rhetorical dimension, in the widest sense of the word. In its rejection of extrinsic approaches and its concentration on the text "as such", the text "itself" - a curious idea for a deconstructionist, I should think, in any case virtually unacceptable to a hermeneuticist, but especially widespread in Miller -, deconstruction is like new criticism returned with a vengeance (as de Man said: the new critics did not read close enough! Cf. Eaves/Fischer, eds., 142). Deconstruction's prime interest is to "interpret as exactly as possible the oscillations in meaning produced by the irreducible figurative nature of language" (Miller, "Function" 13), its maxim is never to forget "the decisive function of figurative language in making meaning heterogeneous or undecidable" (Miller, "Function" 18). Its business is intrinsic through and through,⁷ and if a text refers to anything at all, it is, most probably, to another one. This conviction is shared by all the American deconstructors in question, even by Harold Bloom ("Texts don't have meanings, except in their relations to other texts, so that there is something uneasily dialectical about literary meaning. [...] A text is a relational event, and not a substance to be analyzed." "Necessity" 274), whose psychologically tinged theory of "poetic misprision" or creative misreading - which I shall not expound here - is at its core as deconstructive as deconstruction can be, as Paul de Man pointed out in his review of Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.⁸ And if Bloom now affirms that "every received text - even Shakespeare, even the Bible - is secondary", and that his students are primary, "they are the text. The Bible or Shakespeare is a commentary upon them. There are no texts. There are only ourselves" (Salusinszky 73), this only goes to show how easily a textualism or lingualism collapses into

⁷ Cf. Miller in Eaves/Fischer, eds., 101: "A metaphysical method of literary study assumes that literature is in one way or another referential, in one way or another grounded in something outside language. This something may be physical objects, or "society", or the economic realities of labor, valuation, and exchange. It may be consciousness, the Cogito, or the unconscious, or absolute spirit, or God. An antimetaphysical or "deconstructive" form of literary study attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case, metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself. They are undermined by some figurative play within the text which forbids it to be read as an "organic unity" organized around some version of the logos. The play of tropes leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning, an unearned increment, so to speak, making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries. The following out of the implications of the play of tropes leads to a suspension of fully rationalizable meaning in the experience of an aporia or boggling of the mind. This boggling sets up an oscillation in meaning. Dialectical opposites capable of synthesis may break down into contradictory elements which are differences among the same."

⁸ Cf. de Man, Review of Bloom's *Anxiety* 273: "We can forget about the temporal scheme and about the pathos of the oedipal son; underneath, the book deals with the difficulty or, rather, the impossibility of reading and, by inference, with the indeterminacy of literary meaning. If we are willing to set aside the trappings of psychology, Bloom's essay has much to say on the encounter between latecomer and precursor as a displaced version of the pragmatic encounter between reader and text."

subjectivism or even solipsism. Again, the *volte face* is in the logic of that approach, and the Romantics' desire to "overcome" - one way or another, either by annihilation and submission or by totalization of the self - "the split between subject and object, between the self and the world" (cf. Davis/Schleifer, eds. 15, the words are René Wellek's from Frye, ed., 132) shines through.

But whenever language and thought are conceived of as being coextensive, the discourse cannot help but indicate tacitly an acknowledgement of its limitations. Whether it is Romanticism's or deconstruction's discourse, its "other" is always inscribed:

Every construction, every system - that is, every text - has within itself the ignorance of its own exterior as the rupture of its coherence which it cannot account for. No text can remove itself from a relation to the extralinguistic, and none can determine that relation. This undecidable relation to what it is constantly related to, prevents the text from closing into a totality. The undecidability of its referentiality means that the text is open, and so fragmentary, at every point. (Frey in Brooks et al., eds., 132, cf. Miller, *Ethics* 56ff.)

But it is in the way they deal with this "outside" that Romanticism and deconstruction differ most profoundly. The last part will show why Romanticism and deconstruction are distant relations only and that the closeness the deconstructors insinuate is of an elective kind only.

V Distant relations and elective affinities

William Wordsworth was afraid that if language were regarded as a mere dress of thought, then it would be "a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve" (2: 85). This characterization of language matches strikingly the idea the deconstructors have of the workings of language in general, although they oppose as violently as Wordsworth did the notion that thought and expression can be separated. Why is it that the evil spirit has entered the house of language although its guardians have subscribed to what Wordsworth saw as the "correct" view?

It has been shown - I hope, convincingly - that philosophies which assert the identity of language and thinking at one point or another collapse into linguistic and epistemological scepticism. In this, Romanticism and deconstruction do not differ. They do share basic convictions as to the relation of language and thought - and run into similar difficulties because of them. But when we read the deconstructors' readings of the Romantics, we immediately see where the difference comes in. The deconstructors are not interested in the obvious, large-scale contradictions and aporias of Romanticism, for which I gave a few examples

above. They accept these as a matter of course. What they are interested in is the hardly noticeable rifts and contradictions, the small-scale aporias which have so far escaped the notice of traditional criticism. Deconstruction detects the fissures and strains in the very building material of Romantic texts and delights in showing how easily collapsible seemingly solid and harmless poems are. The crisis has deepened, doubt has percolated all the way through, from a doubt about the sayability of the unsayable to a doubt about the sayability of anything. In this, Romanticism and deconstruction are radically opposed. And in nothing is this difference more obvious than in the diametrically opposed conclusions they draw from their insight into the essentially figurative nature of language. For the Romantics it was clear that if language is figurative and metaphorical through and through, then truth can only be attained through figurality. For the deconstructors, following Nietzsche, it is clear that then it cannot be attained at all.

Derrida observed that "everything became discourse" the moment the transcendental signifier - be it God, Reason, or Man, or whatever - was found out to be a fiction. It seems to me that this loss of a transcendental perspective still ails the deconstructors more than they dare admit. There is in Derrida an unmistakable suffering and a quarrel with that nothing that cannot be named⁹ that sometimes puts him close to negative theology and mysticism. The yearning for transcendence is equally discernible in Miller (cf. Arac 11) and Bloom, though maybe less so in Hartman. In de Man only we find the sardonic smile of the detached sceptic who, unperturbed, looks upon the touching vanity of *soi-disant* human understanding (cf. Hartman, *Fate* 309).

⁹ Cf. Derrida, *Wie nicht sprechen*, and the following exchange in Fabb et al., eds., 260/261:
Jonathan Culler: I imagine many people here were puzzled by your remark a few moments ago that you had never said that the metaphysics of presence was bad, I was wondering whether you would care to explain, first by expanding on the remark that followed it - that there is no good outside metaphysics of presence - and then perhaps say a word or two about what then drives the impetus to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. *Derrida*: I start at the end because it could be a way of answering the first part of your question. I often ask myself: why insist on deconstructing something which is so good? And the only answer I have is something which contradicts, in ourselves, or in myself, the desire for this good. But where does this contradiction come from? First, I give it a name which sometimes I write with a capital letter, that is, Necessity - and I write this word with a capital letter just to emphasise the fact that it's a singular necessity, as a single person. I have to deal with Necessity itself. It is something or someone, some x, which compels me to admit that my desire, for good, for presence, my own metaphysics of presence, not only cannot be accomplished, meets its limit, but *should* not be accomplished because the accomplishment or the fulfilment of the desire for presence would be death itself; the good, the absolute good, would be identical with death. At the same time, the one whom I call Necessity teaches me, in a very violent way, to admit that my desire cannot be fulfilled, that there is no presence, that presence is always divided and split and marked by differences, by spacing, etc. So this is on the one hand a bad limit, something which *m'empêche de jouir pleinement*, but at the same time is the condition of my desire, and if such limits were erased this would be death, this *will* be death.

But the American deconstructors never descend to the downright cynicism of a Baudrillard. In them there is still a glimmer, albeit faint, of commitment to that ongoing project which for the Romantics was part and parcel of their philosophical outfit, but which has, in the meantime, not only been discredited but also been declared obsolete as just another one of the "great tales" - the project of Enlightenment. A lot of what the Romantics did can be seen as a supplement to a concept of reason and enlightenment that they judged to be incomplete or too narrow. Bloom knows that "The polemic of Romantic poetry (...) is directed against inadequate accounts of reason, not against reason itself", they "reason with a later reason" (Blake) ("To Reason" 97) against "instrumental" versions of it. But they did not question the enterprise. For them, there was a transcendental signifier (whatever names they gave it), a something that - not without doubts and crises for them - gave *sense and meaning* to what they did, a "presence" (in Derrida's terms) primarily experienced as an *obligation*. This is lacking in deconstruction.

As I have shown in my essay on paradox, deconstruction turns to Romanticism because Romanticism is sufficiently *different* from its own discourse and because in its seeming consistency it presents a good prey - though not an easy one - to deconstruction's interpretive moves. Here, I hope to have shown that Romanticism and deconstruction are sufficiently *similar* to regard the latter as a late offshoot of the former. But whenever deconstruction turns to Romanticism because there it hopes to find either something akin and congenial to itself or something attractively different, the result of that elective affinity is necessarily a *transformation* in both. "Elective affinity" is originally a term from physics and chemistry (Torbern Bergman, *De attractionibus electivis*, 1775), denoting, among other things, the chemical attraction of acids and alkalis, which results in a totally new substance, changing each component from what it is into something else (e.g. sodium and chlorine into table salt) (see McFarland, *Romanticism* 327ff., Miller "Buchstäbliches" Reading"). That is why the relation of Romanticism to deconstruction, distant anyhow, is also an elective affinity in its original sense: their encounters leave neither unchanged.

And what, finally, of language and thought? Of course, one can say that all there is is language. But then one would always have to admit that, invariably and inevitably, the rest is Silence.

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