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“Like a Guilty Thing Surprised”: Deconstruction, Coleridge, and the Apostasy of Criticism

Jerome Christensen

Apostasy's so fashionable, too.

—BYRON, *Don Juan*

In his recent book *Criticism and Social Change* Frank Lentricchia melodramatically pits his critical hero Kenneth Burke, advocate of the intellect's intervention in social life, against the villainous Paul de Man, “undisputed master in the United States of what is called deconstruction.” Lentricchia charges that “the insidious effect of [de Man's] work is not the proliferating replication of his way of reading . . . but the paralysis of praxis itself: an effect that traditionalism, with its liberal view of the division of culture and political power, should only applaud.”¹ He goes on to prophesy that

the deconstruction of deconstruction will reveal, against apparent intention, a tacit political agenda after all, one that can only embarrass deconstruction, particularly its younger proponents whose activist experiences within the socially wrenching upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s will surely not permit them easily to relax, without guilt and self-hatred, into resignation and ivory tower despair. [CSC, p. 40]

Such is Lentricchia's strenuous conjuration of a historical moment in which he can forcefully intervene—a summons fraught with the pathos excited by any reference to the heady days of political enthusiasm during the war in Vietnam. Lentricchia ominously figures a scene of rueful solitude where de Manian lucidity bleakens into the big chill. And maybe

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it will. But Lentricchia furnishes no good reason why it should. De Manian deconstruction is “deconstructed” by Lentricchia to reveal “against apparent intention, a tacit political agenda.” And this revelation is advertised as a sure embarrassment to the younger practitioners of deconstruction—sweepingly characterized as erstwhile political activists who have, wide-eyed, opted for a critical approach that magically entangles its proponents in the soul-destroying delights of rhetoric and reaction. Left unexamined in Lentricchia’s story, however, is the basis for the initial rapport between radicalism and deconstruction. Why should collegiate activists have turned into deconstructionists? Is not that, in Lentricchia’s terms, the same question as asking why political activists should have turned to literary criticism (or indeed literature) at all? If we suppose this original turn (to criticism, to deconstruction) to be intentional, how could the initiates of this critical approach ever be genuinely *betrayed* into embarrassment by time or by its herald, Frank Lentricchia? On the face of it, the traducement of a secret intention would be unlikely to come as a surprise, since deconstructing deconstruction is not only the enterprise of Marxist critics like Lentricchia but also of Jacques Derrida, archdeconstructor, who unashamedly identified the embarrassment of intention as constitutive of the deconstructive method. If deconstruction is at once a natural outlet for activists and the first step on a slippery slope that ends in apostasy (for surely it is that hard word which Lentricchia politely suppresses), it suggests a phenomenon with contours more suggestively intricate, if not less diabolically seductive, than the program Lentricchia outlines. And it is a phenomenon as worrisomely affiliative as it is bafflingly intricate. We need to know whether the relations between deconstruction and radical politics, between deconstruction and apostasy, between deconstruction and criticism, and between apostasy and criticism are necessary or contingent, or neither and both at once.

I do not intend to address those questions head-on but instead to follow the path of what Edmund, not Kenneth, Burke called “philosophic analogy.”² Philosophic analogy is a way of doing history that is probably more conservative and certainly more literary than the mode Lentricchia prefers—though not than the one he practices, for the prophecy that he makes depends on a buried analogy. The analogy exploits the similarity between the experience of the proponents of activism in the late 1960s and their English predecessors in the 1790s, who likewise started out in glad political agitation and ended in sad aesthetic contemplation. The

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analogy derives a specific historical gravity from the notable intersection of the heyday of campus activism in the late sixties with the first enthusiastic reception of deconstruction in America, the latter signaled by the publication in 1970 of the Johns Hopkins symposium "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,"³ and with the aggressive revival of romanticism by what has since become known as the Yale school, announced by Harold Bloom's landmark collection *Romanticism and Consciousness* in the same year. Both of those books were preceded by de Man's masterly essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in 1969.⁴ If there is such a thing as coincidence, this connection of political turmoil with deconstruction with romanticism is not it. The dominant model of our modern understanding of the relation between politics and poetry is derived from romantic experience and romantic practice. For the relation between politics and criticism it is possible to be even more precise: the pattern is the career of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. If it is true, as Lentricchia affirms, speaking existentially, that there "is a de Man in us all," it is because, speaking historically, there is a Coleridge in de Man (*CSC*, p. 51).⁵ The deconstructive method makes a neat fit with the Coleridgean text—a fit so neat as to suggest a propriety for deconstruction in Coleridge. Without understanding that fit it is impossible to understand how apostasy comes so naturally to modern critics, how we can greet our embarrassment and guilt like old friends.

That decorum of deconstruction has historical dimensions: deconstruction takes its appointed place within what M. H. Abrams once described as the "prosecutorial tradition" of Coleridgean criticism, one which supplements the two great themes in Coleridge, originality and fidelity, with their dogged specters, plagiarism and apostasy. This accusatory line of Coleridgean criticism, earliest associated with the names of his contemporaries and friends Thomas De Quincey and William Hazlitt, is now most closely identified with the names Norman Fruman, author of *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, and E. P. Thompson. Although I shall follow out the apostasy branch of the family here, I do not mean to imply that it has any precedence or that it is ultimately distinct from the fraternal line. It would be an easy matter to demonstrate that the coalescence of plagiarism and apostasy is Coleridge's very signature: STC.⁶

Thompson, who first addressed the issue of apostasy and its relation to the decline of creative power in the finely textured and acute essay "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," later put the case against Coleridge with renewed severity in a review of David Erdman's edition of *Essays on His Times*, the collection of Coleridge's journalism. Coleridge, he proclaims, "is chiefly of interest, in his political writings, as an example of the intellectual complexity of apostasy. He was, of course, a political apostate."⁷ If we trace back the pedigree of Thompson's indictment, it takes us, as he forthrightly admits, to Hazlitt. Indeed, he compares the two, to Coleridge's embarrassment. But we cannot rest there. The very

problem of apostasy as Hazlitt conceived it was derived from Coleridge's early, dangerously insightful profile of Edmund Burke. The figure of Burke that Coleridge painted in *The Watchman*, "this *Cameleon* [sic] of *hues*, as *brilliant* as they are *changing*," was the pattern for the figure of Coleridge that Hazlitt later acidly engraved in essays and reviews. The lavish irony with which Coleridge characterized Burke's apostasy—"At the flames which rise from the altar of Freedom, he kindled that torch with which he since endeavoured to set fire to her temple"—is the same trope with which Hazlitt, applying less color and more vitriol, attempted to diminish his former oracle.⁸ "*Once a Jacobin and always a Jacobin*," he remarks (ironically quoting Coleridge who was ironically quoting Pitt),

is a maxim, which, notwithstanding Mr. Coleridge's see-saw reasoning to the contrary, we hold to be true, even of him to this day. *Once an Apostate and always an Apostate*, we hold to be equally true; and the reason why the last is true, is that the first is so. A person who is what is called a Jacobin . . . that is, who has shaken off certain well known prejudices with respect to kings or priests, or nobles, cannot so easily resume them again, whenever his pleasure or his convenience may prompt him to attempt it.⁹

As for Burke, the irony of Coleridge's reversal from Jacobin to ministerial tool is that there has been no real change at all.

But if Hazlitt shows that Coleridge is constrained by a compulsive rhetoric of reversal, Hazlitt himself is not free of the Coleridgean figure. By equating Jacobin and apostate under the act of "shaking off," he curiously vitiates the moral force of his indictment; he formalizes change into a pattern of mechanical repetition that is more exigent than any ethical posture or political program. Hazlitt captures Coleridge within the restraints of his ironic equation only to open a trapdoor through which Coleridge escapes, leaving behind any responsibility, let alone culpability, for actions that are compulsive rather than wicked, paradigmatic rather than perverse. Hazlitt's assertion, "*Once an Apostate and always an Apostate*," is true but only if modified in a way that discharges it of its polemical force: "*Once an apostate and always already an apostate*" is the better, not to mention more fashionable, motto. At every point we examine him, even at the beginning, Coleridge is already falling away from every principled commitment—commitments which are, indeed, endowed with significance solely by that lapse and the critical reflection it allows.¹⁰

Partisan grievances aside, the label of "apostate" is technically accurate. A metaphysics of apostasy is explicitly adumbrated by Coleridge in the notebooks of 1818 and in his marginal notes on the *Works* of Jakob Böhme, worked out at roughly the same time.¹¹ Coleridge introduced the technical term "apostasis" as part of his endeavor to employ Friedrich

Schelling's model of dynamic polarity purged of its pantheistic implications. Specifically, he aimed to avoid the Schellingian error of the "establishment of Polarity in the Absolute."¹² At first Coleridge hoped to find an alternative to Schelling in Böhme. His marginalia record his disappointment: "As I read on, I have found that this first Chapter [of the *Mysterium Magnum*] is a deceptive Promise: that Behmen soon deviates into his original error . . . and places the polarities *in* the Deity, [making] them eternal." In other words, Böhme is guilty of an "anticipation of the Apostasis in the Stasis" (*M* 1:678, entry 158). The terms are important. Coleridge has come to regard apostasis as the crucial articulation of a cosmogonic paradigm that would take account of the law of polarity and yet preserve the determinant, singular unity of an absolute which is not nature, not, that is, the mere copula or exponent of polar energies.¹³

Coleridge sketched out this paradigm in a notebook entry. Contrary to both Schelling and Böhme, Coleridge insists that there

must be the way downwards and the way upwards—but this is because there are two Spheres, . . . the Plenitude and nature—the way downwards commencing with the Fall from God, Apostasy—the path of transit with the Chaos and the *descent* of the Spirit—the way upwards with the genesis of Light.—Thus in my Logosophia I have four great Divisions, I. That which is neither ascent or descent—for instead of a way, it's that "*from* which" and "*to* which," not a road at all, but at once the starting-post, and the Goal.—Call it then Stasis. II. Apostasy or the way downwards. III. Metastasis. IV. the way upwards. More neatly thus: I. Stasis II. Apostasy III. Metastasis IV. Anastasis.¹⁴

Immediately following this arcane deduction Coleridge asks the question which must be in the mind of every uninitiated reader: "Well but what is the use of all this?" My answer is not the same as his. The use, clear from our neo-Hazlittian perspective, lies in the transformation of "*Once an Apostate and always an Apostate*" into a cosmogonic crux. Apostasy is the crucial, or rather, the *critical* stage of Coleridge's paradigm because it is the first break in the stasis that precedes all paradigms, the standing away that precipitates the creation. The first move, apostasy is also the essential move—a move in the service of essence; for only the standing off permits the manifestation of the godhead—either as stasis or as what, in the marginalia on Böhme, Coleridge calls Prothesis:

For in God the Prothesis is not manifested for itself, but only in the Fountain which he is from all eternity because he never can subsist but with the Light in the bosom of the Fountain, whence proceeds the Spirit. But in the Creation as conditioned by the Fall of, Apostasis, the Prothesis is manifested as the Hardness, the

Austerity, the stone indeed of the foundation, but likewise the Stone of offence. [M 1:649, entry 116]

Apostasy is, then, that *once*, the detachment or fall of man from the divine that was originally his base, as it also is, in a curious sense, that *always*—for the continual standing forth of man's will is a continual apostasy that reenacts his providential fall—providential because, though a fall, it manifests the divine stasis and promises the anastatic return of the human to that eternal light.

Although proved on the ragged pulse of Coleridge's social and political life, his apostasy is supposedly redeemed when referred to the life of that life, that "I am," which is the finite repetition of "the All-might, which God's Will is, and which he knoweth within himself as the Abyss of his Being—the eternal *Act* of Self-constitution" (M 1:659, entry 135), and which endows all human action with meaning. Coleridge's metaphysics could be read as a transcendental excuse for the moral weakness of the political journalist—one example among many of the Coleridgean aptitude for turning diseases into pearls and a maneuver not less effective for its transparency.¹⁵ From that perspective Coleridge's super-Böhmenist paradigm does not so much rebut the indictments of Thompson and Hazlitt as annul them by referring them to a higher court, preserve of a purer, more categorical law.

If this sublimation thwarts the attacks of the Hazlittian line, it is, however, also the move that invites the intervention of the deconstructionist. Without mounting a full-scale assault it is possible to outline the procedures that would be undertaken to problematize the authority of the metaphysical construct on which Coleridge relies. They would consist of a criticism of the enabling distinction between an absolute stasis and a consequent but completely distinct polarity, a disenfranchisement of the priority given to the former over the latter, and a challenge to the unity of the one as well as to the bivalence of the other. There would follow an exploitation of the dependence of the system on a difference (that between stasis and apostasy) which is not a polarity, a probing of the infelicitous reliance of the absolute on the fall for its very manifestation. The plot would inexorably ravel toward the conclusion that the metaphysical necessity of this movement to the outside is not something that accidentally befalls the absolute stasis but the genetic destiny of a *logos* that is always only a formation by virtue of that which is about to be extrinsic to it.

The certainty that a deconstruction could be carried out makes the execution unnecessary. Such a supplemental maneuver would only confirm that Coleridge's plot had already provided for its deconstruction, that deconstruction is just another version of the apostasy which Coleridge has already embraced. Supplementarity is Coleridge's device as the margin is his home. To put it another way, metaphysics or philosophical criticism was for Coleridge both apostatic, an ostensible turn away from political

activism and poetic ambition, and an apology for apostasy as the prerequisite for critical reflection, indeed, as the preliminary and continual "Act of Self-constitution" which grounds all meaningful action.

The pattern for Coleridge's strategic apostasy was neither Schelling nor Kant but Edmund Burke, in whose "writings indeed the germs of almost all political truths may be found" (*BL* 1:217) and whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is the chief eighteenth-century instance of the deployment of the apostatic trope. Here again, my concern is not partisan nagging; I do not care to judge whether Burke actually reversed his earlier political principles. In retrospect, far from the hurly-burly pamphlet-mongering of reform and reaction, the distinctive achievement of Burke's *Reflections*, that which makes a certain kind of historical reflection—call it Burkean—*possible*, is his promulgation of the idea of an ancient constitution. For Burke, as J. G. A. Pocock has convincingly argued, the ancient, prescriptive constitution "has two characteristics: it is immemorial—and this is what makes it prescriptive and gives it authority as a constitution—and it is customary."¹⁶ Nowhere detectable by the physical eye, the constitution is, like our revered forefathers, all the more imperiously present by virtue of its empirical absence. The idea of the ancient constitution presupposes an aboriginal law from which Englishmen have necessarily fallen—not morally, as Pocock shows, but historically and hermeneutically, in what Burke calls a "liberal descent" (*R*, p. 121).¹⁷ Descent produces the metaphor of genealogical connection but also functions as a metonym which inscribes the irreducible distance that *makes* it both possible and necessary that men act "upon the principle of reference to antiquity" (*R*, p. 117). Englishmen can never hope to be those fathers, nor could their fathers or theirs hope to be those fathers who are constitutionally already there before them. The absoluteness of the paternal anteriority, however, is the precondition for a liberal descent. Descent succeeds to a primordial detachment of son from father, reader from writer, which inscribes a contingency in the relation between the present and the past, thereby requiring that any necessity in the connection between past and present be adduced retrospectively, chosen by the son rather than imposed by the father. "We wished," writes Burke, "at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers" (*R*, p. 117). The emphasis should fall not on "inheritance" but on "wish" and "derive." Wishes may not be horses, but in the absence of any father except the one he imagines, even the most beggarly Englishman (or Irishman) can ride his wishes into an inheritance that is wholly his option, that is, indeed, nothing other than his interpretation of it: in "this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties"; we "have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our rights and privileges" (*R*,

pp. 120, 121; my emphasis). The aporia between the static and immanent grammar of an absolute law and its performative application to particulars, which de Man has analyzed in Rousseau's *Social Contract*,¹⁸ is exactly the dynamic by which Burke's text and Burke's nation thrive. The distance between the law and its application, as between the father and the son or between the ancient constitution and contemporary cases, is that distance which we have descended consequent upon our turn from grammar, from law, from the past, and which enables us, apostates all, to return in the full force of our wishful derivations, to return in a reading of the history of our descent, a history that is always ancient but which would not be there to be read had we not figured it through our apostasy.

Each man-child is born into this chartered island as a reader of that law which sponsors his historical existence and which by its "penetrating style has engraved in our ordinances, and in our hearts, the words and spirit of that immortal law" (*R*, p. 104). Burke insists that this reading is entailed; but he repeatedly demonstrates that its impression on our hearts is only made possible by our voluntary standing away from a past law or father in order that it can represent itself in us. The text is *constituted* by the head's bloodless detachment of itself from its heart in order to read the history of the mystical body (a history which presupposes such "deviations" [see *R*, pp. 105–6]), in order to return and metaphorically "frame a polity in blood." For Burke, England exists in time and space as a self-reading text; its history is nothing but the allegory of its reading.¹⁹ England reproduces itself in a male parthenogenesis, fathers endlessly propagating sons who, never coincident with the original law from which they have fallen, have as their historical mission endless reflection on it. *English* history is simultaneously fidelity to and apostasy from the law, a paradox that makes and preserves the constitution by insuring that it is at once ancient and continually reconstituted by reflection.²⁰ The content of individual reflections is not important to Burke, nor is indefinite interpretability a problem—so long as the indefinite is disciplined and redeemed by the shaping spirit of a continual apostasy, a continual alienation from some undiscovered country of the past.

A crossing from Burke to Coleridge can be made via the following passage, a good example of the kind of attention to principles for which Burke was consistently applauded by his successor:

On what grounds do we go to restore our constitution to what it has been at one definite period, or to reform and reconstruct it upon principles more conformable to a sound theory of government? A prescriptive government, such as ours, never was the work of any legislator, never was made upon any foregone theory. It seems to me a preposterous way of reasoning, and perfect confusion of ideas, to take the theories which learned and speculative men have made from that government, and then, supposing it

made on those theories, which were made from it, to accuse the government as not corresponding with them.²¹

The best Coleridgean gloss on this ridicule of the preposterous is the famous Leibnizian aphorism from the *Biographia*, "There is nothing in the mind that was not before in the senses, except the mind itself,"²² which, to adapt it to Burke, should be revised thus: "There is nothing in the constitution that was not first the work of a legislator, except the constitution itself."

In the *Biographia* the equivalent of Burke's ancient constitution, that which grounds and entails all our reflections, is the mind itself: "I began then to ask myself, what proof I had of the outward *existence* of any thing? . . . I saw, that in the nature of things such proof is impossible; and that of all modes of being, that are not objects of the senses, the existence is *assumed* by a logical necessity arising from the constitution of the mind itself" (*BL* 1:200). "The constitution of the mind"—the phrase is not in Johnson but may be met with at the beginning of Burke's "Letter to a Noble Lord," where Burke summons the idea of a "*complete* revolution" that has "extended even to the constitution of the mind of man."²³ Coleridge's usage is thoroughly Burkean; it comprises the way the mind is constituted and the way the mind constitutes, which ideally come to the same thing, for "Truth is the correlative of Being" (*BL* 1:142). This identity is ancient because it must be postulated as subsisting before any moment in which we can come to know it: "During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. . . . While I am attempting to explain this intimate coalition, I must suppose it dissolved" (*BL* 1:255). For Coleridge as for Burke all understanding is reflection on a past moment that is the condition of our knowledge but that can never directly be known. The mind is a self-reading text reproducing itself in an aporetic descent.

As is the *Biographia*, which resolutely rejects all readers except that one who proves his gentleness by absenting himself in favor of the author: "If however the reader will permit me to be my own Hierocles," Coleridge requests at the beginning of chapter twelve, referring to the Alexandrian commentator on neo-Pythagorean texts. If the reader does consent, he lets the *Biographia* be what it wants to be, at once (or almost at once) Pythagorean oracle and Hierocletian commentary. The *Biographia* is a continuous falling away from itself that is a reading of itself, falling to know its constitution, falling to know the course of its descent—a narcissism providentially flawed by the apostasis that motivates a theoretically endless tracking.²⁴ Coleridge continues,

I have now before me a treatise of a religious fanatic, full of dreams and supernatural *experiences*. I see clearly the writer's

grounds, and their hollowness. I have a complete insight into the causes, which through the medium of his body had acted on his mind; and by application of received and ascertained laws I can satisfactorily explain to my own reason all the strange incidents, which the writer records of himself. And this I can do without suspecting him of any intentional falsehood. As when in broad day-light a man tracks the steps of a traveller, who had lost his way in a fog or by treacherous moonshine, even so, and with the same tranquil sense of certainty, can I follow the traces of this bewildered visionary. [*BL*, 1:232–33]

De Man never said it better, though say it he did:

[Insight] exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right—the question of his own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask—and so being able to distinguish between statement and meaning. He has to undo the explicit results of a vision that is able to move toward the light only because, being already blind, it does not have to fear the power of this light.²⁵

In Coleridge's usage the very insight of the visionary, the coincidence of the spiritual eye with its ideal object, is identical to his blindness and known only by his fall into bewilderment. As night passes into day the visionary's tracks lead to the understanding Coleridge, who stands apart from his benighted predecessor. The commentator can explain a blinded insight because he has fallen farther; he can stand back from the experience that enfolded its author and see it as a page, as something already written; and he can follow the betrayed man's tracks to a source where he understands the visionary's ignorance but where, in his very lucidity, he becomes equally blind to his own.

There are numerous places in the *Biographia* where such a procedure could be illustrated. Some of them, such as the anecdote of the 'possessed' German maid in chapter six, the interruption of the letter from a friend in chapter thirteen, the criticism of "Fidelity" in chapter twenty-two, and the account of the epiphany of Wordsworth's genius in chapter four, I have analyzed elsewhere with the objective of releasing the uncanny rhetoricity of this astonishing book. My objective here is to persuade that such tropism serves a purpose. Let us refer to the autobiographical account in chapter ten of a strange evening during the young Coleridge's subscription campaign for his radically evangelical periodical *The Watchman*. Suffering equally from the "poison" of tobacco and the tonic of the night air, surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers and potential subscribers, he had "sunk back on the sofa in a sort of swoon." On awakening from "insensibility" and being asked, "by way of relieving [his] embarrassment, . . . 'Have you seen a paper to day, Mr. Coleridge?,'" Coleridge, like a guilty

thing surprised, confessed to his doubts regarding the morality of a Christian reading "newspapers or any other works of merely political and temporary interest"—a repudiation of the very course of action to which he had applied all his energies (*BL* 1:183).

Not only is this an instance of Hierocletian commentary, of the insightful, self-reading autobiographer tracking the bewildered visionary of his youth; that bewilderment, an emblematic moment of social blindness, is itself presented as an insight into an apostasy which has *already* occurred and been repressed. Coleridge had earlier adapted Wordsworth to describe his autobiographical progress as "sounding on my dim and perilous way" (*BL* 1:105). In this passage resonate soundings both canny and uncanny. Coleridge's daylight, journalistic intention to sound out support for his radical newspaper is thwarted by nocturnal soundings from the land of smoke and mist. The spirit of apostasy, "which the writings of Burke" legitimated for "the higher and [for] the literary classes, may . . . like the ghost in Hamlet, be heard moving and mining in the underground chambers" (*BL* 1:192). Harkening to that spirit, the aroused Hierocles awakens from his jacobinic slumber and, in a moment of spontaneous reflection, sounds out his own "grounds, and [exposes] their hollowness." The return of the Burkean specter, ventriloquizing like truth itself, bewilders the visionary, mocking the "pert loquacity" of the social critic and political activist, and undermining any practical, worldly action whatever. Even in the first flush of his enthusiasm, Coleridge, as a wiser Coleridge tells us, had already turned away from the faith he was proselytizing.

The objective correlative of his apostasy, Coleridge's dramatic swoon amidst a group of left-wing sympathizers, both makes possible his blindly insightful ejaculation and protects it from censure. Because clearly he cannot mean what he says, he is released from the consequences of his utterance by a general laughter. But, of course, one point of the anecdote in the context of chapter ten is that eventually Coleridge, who devotes much of the *Biographia* (as he had *The Friend*) to attacks on the production and consumption of periodicals and novels, *did* come to mean what he said. When did coming to mean occur? Could the turning point be pushed back to the moment (prophetic, as things turned out) of coming out of the swoon? Was Coleridge then confused or canny in his utterance? Did the swoon release an inadvertent prophecy, or did Coleridge swoon in order to tell a, if not *the*, truth? Does Coleridge the autobiographer mean to raise the question of meaning or is it an exegetical imposition? We enter the zone of that undecidability that de Man has glossed with reference to Proust:

No one can decide whether Proust invented metaphors because he felt guilty or whether he had to declare himself guilty in order to find a use for his metaphors. Since the only irreducible 'intention' of a text is that of its constitution, the second hypothesis is in fact

less unlikely than the first. The problem has to be suspended in its own indecision. [AR, p. 65]

De Man works hard to produce these aporias in the texts he reads. Coleridge, as we know from the preface to "Kubla Khan," which tells of another drug-induced swoon, is at work even when he is asleep, and there is work being done here, work that produces the curious suspension that de Man identifies as quintessentially literary, and work that pits the literary so defined against all forms of ideology. The autobiographer endorses a self-reading that stands apart from any political or social goal whatever: it is, as the amused reaction of the reform-minded audience shows, exempt from the judgment of worldlings, beyond good and evil. The anecdote represents a Coleridge who was an apostate from the beginning and who approves apostasy as at worst an innocent act of some amusement to "the multitudinous public," or, at best, as a method for incisively discriminating between the temporary and the permanent, for transforming social and political "realities" into texts able to be read, for suspending action in favor of reflection.

What are opposed to works of "merely political and temporary interest"? Works of permanent interest—and permanent because productive of true and lasting pleasure. Poetry, in other words. But not just any poetry, and not necessarily even that poetry which yields the most immediate pleasure: "not the poem which we have *read*, but that to which we *return*, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of *essential poetry*" (BL 1:23). Opposed to works of science by its object, poetry is opposed to works of politics by the durability of its pleasure. The merits of poetry are neither substantive nor intrinsic. If poetry is in some sense the hero of the swooning episode as it is in some sense the hero of the *Biographia* as a work of philosophical criticism, the action which proves the merit of the hero—the allegory of its matchless identity—is a commentary. Every hero requires his Hierocles. Every poem requires a critic. As the vindication of Wordsworth's genius is not its actual epiphany *in illo tempore* but Coleridge's return to and dramatic repetition of that revelation in chapter four of the *Biographia*, so does the merit of every poem depend on such a return—anastasis. And every return requires an initial departure, a standing away or apostasy, which is metastatically hinged to its successor.

That plot comprises the moves identified by de Man in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" as "the three moments of flight, return, and the turning point at which flight changes into return or vice-versa" (BI, p. 163). De Man abstracts those three moments from a plot shared by Nietzsche, Rousseau, and Baudelaire, who, exemplary modernists all, aspire to a clean rupture with literature and the past, and who suffer the ironic consequences of that ambition:

The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence. [BI, p. 162]

De Man is repeating a Coleridgean insight and mystifying it as he goes along, for de Man insists that his story is told from "the point of view of the writer as subject," whereas his examples (Boileau, Fontenelle, Nietzsche, and Baudelaire) and the Coleridgean precedent both argue that the actual point of view from which de Man tells his story is that of the writer as critic. If we are to accept that "the only irreducible 'intention' of a text is its constitution," it should be added that the only constitution of a text is its criticism. Coleridge's aphorism of departure and return is the story of criticism, which is distinguished from common reading insofar as it is motivated, insofar as the standing away is an apostasy (or flight), and insofar as the return is an anastasis (or reflection). It takes a critic to tell the common reader those works which he should reread.

The best critic is the lapsed poet. The high drama of the Wordsworthian epiphany in the *Biographia* is owed to Coleridge's endeavor to depict it as a rapturous stasis from which he can fall away into the seminal imagination/fancy distinction that concludes chapter four and that ordains his blossoming as a genuine critic. Coleridge manages a double flight: from Wordsworth and from his own poetic ambitions. This apostasy makes possible and prepares for the reading of Wordsworth that occupies most of volume two—completing the constitution of Wordsworth's genius and, incidentally, modern poetry. This is not by any means the only story in the *Biographia* or the only apostasy in a text that moves from faith to faith, master to master (Bowyer, Bowles, Hartley, Wordsworth, Kant, Schelling)—all the while subjecting each authority to an allegory of apostasy mastered only by Coleridgean criticism. The critic derives his inheritance; like Burke, he engineers the metalepsis of coming to author the text he reads: hence the curious coincidence between becoming one's own Hierocles and being the commentator on a poetic text. The critic is always the author of the texts he reads, constituting literature as his autobiography, as the history of criticism. By claiming *always* I do not appeal to logic but to history: this state of affairs is not necessarily so, but it has ever been so since Coleridge. We critics would not know what social reality is if Coleridge had not fallen away from it. His falling away makes the "criticism" of social reality possible by rendering it as a *topic* completely interchangeable with any other god term that criticism symbolically substitutes for that absolute whose given name is "poetry" or "literature"

and which criticism uses retrospectively to motivate and glorify its flight—to turn metonymy or mere contingency into apostasis. Every celebration of the recuperative powers of literature assists in the institution, elaboration, and reproduction of modern, that is, post-Coleridgean criticism.

Apostasy is to metonymy as the Fall is to a lapse. The distinction measures the distance between Coleridge's early nineteenth-century and de Man's late twentieth-century projects. Imagine that distance as two points of view on difference. Coleridge wants to motivate a difference that de Man aims to abstract from all intention.²⁶ Writing at Highgate and trying to salvage something from a spendthrift career of erratic brilliance, humiliating dependency, and steady marginalization, Coleridge uses "apostasy" to render the possibly contingent as somehow necessary and to figure the ostensibly compulsive as somehow purposeful.²⁷ Writing after the storm of mid-century European history, centered and chaired within a prestigious department within a powerful university, addressing a profession whose most engrossing critical debates have always taken place on familiar Coleridgean grounds, de Man can afford the *askesis* that strips literature to its blind mechanisms, defrauds it of its glory. Surely Lentricchia is right that there is nothing subversive or risky about this maneuver. It is because Coleridge is writing in the wilderness outside an academy yet to come that he needs to motivate the "same" move and give it purpose, so that the plot of criticism he identifies can presuppose its history, establish its tradition, simulate permanence and progression—in short, make the world safe for Paul de Man.

After Coleridge there is no criticism without apostasy. And there are no heroes of criticism who were not first apostates. Kenneth Burke is no exception. Lentricchia begins his "pursuit of the issue of criticism as social force" by recalling an episode, recounted by Kenneth Burke, in which Burke delivered his paper "Revolutionary Symbolism in America" to the first American Writers' Congress at Madison Square Garden in 1935. Burke's paper, in which, according to Lentricchia, he rewrote and elaborated Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach, proposed to

America's radical left not only that a potentially revolutionary culture should keep in mind that revolution must be culturally as well as economically rooted, but, as well . . . that a revolutionary culture must situate itself firmly on the terrain of its capitalist antagonist, must not attempt a dramatic leap beyond capitalism in one explosive, rupturing moment of release, must work its way through capitalism's language of domination by working cunningly within it, using, appropriating, even speaking through its key mechanisms of repression. [CSC, p. 24]

Lentricchia admires Burke's unscared awareness of the force of ideology, his keen sense of the cultural basis of domination and, in stark contrast

to the de Man of "Literary History and Literary Modernity," his disavowal of a "romantic" notion of revolutionary rupture, which is a prescription for failure, whether espoused by American Marxists or Yale critics. Lentricchia notes, however, that when Burke recalled the incident he gleefully attested to the irate reaction of his audience: it "produced hallucinations of 'excrement . . . dripping from my tongue,' of his name being shouted as a 'kind of charge' against him, a 'dirty word'—'Burke!'" Lentricchia applauds the "heresy" and "deviance" of Burke's portentous and prophetic remarks but fails to comment on the circumstantially specific irony that Burke's "challenge to the Marxist intellectual" to forswear self-defeating, paralyzing notions of rupture is just such a moment of rupture (CSC, pp. 21, 26). In that locale Burke's turn to symbolism and culture, a move that, for Lentricchia, is the paradigmatic action constituting a socially effective criticism, was in fact an apostasy. To what are we to attend, Burke's text or his performance? Which has more social force? Which is more symbolic? Or is there any difference? Who can say? What is to be done? Who can tell the saying from the doing? Lentricchia does not risk his confidence in intervention by taking up those rhetorical questions. But if his avoidance saves him from the more overt symptoms of paralysis, it decisively blinds him to the preternaturally acute insight expressed by Burke's audience, who, with a wit of dreamlike velocity and aptness, instantaneously deployed "Burke" as a "kind of charge," as "dirty word," catching the pun that twins Kenneth with that Edmund whose surname has been, ever since the explosive publication of *Reflections*, a byword for political apostasy. To follow out that dreamlike association, to inquire into the complicities between revolution and reaction under the rubric of "culture," would be to derive the descent from Burke's Burke to Burke's obsessive identifications with Coleridge to the point at the beginning of de Man's *Allegories of Reading* where he cites Burke's mention of "*deflection* . . . defined as 'any slight bias or even unintended error,' as the rhetorical basis of language"—a notion which de Man subsequently employs to deconstruct all intentionalist, not to mention interventionist, notions of rhetoric (AR, p. 8).

It is not merely the work of de Man, then, that has "the insidious effect of . . . paraly[zing] praxis itself." The sleep of praxis is the birth of criticism. Or so it is if we take Coleridge as our canonized forefather and regardless of whether we opt for Paul de Man or Kenneth, not Edmund, Burke as godfather. Paralysis or a constitutional "aversion to real action" is the characteristic that this critical Hamlet installed at the center of the literary culture of which he was the chief, if not only, begetter. To freely adapt the critic:

The critical mind, . . . unseated from its healthy balance, is for ever occupied with the world within, and abstracted from external things—giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all

common-place realities. . . . Hence it is that the sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the reflection upon it;—not from the impression, but from the imaginative reflex. . . . Hamlet [like Coleridge, like de Man, like Burke] feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he beholds external objects as hieroglyphics.²⁸

Having abjured the outside world, fallen into the trance of literature, there is no reference except to antiquity, that ghostly father who haunts our latter days. No doubt the tacit political agenda of deconstruction is apostasy, but with no less doubt that apostasy is the imaginative reflex or trope that constitutes modern criticism. And it is because of that inaugural apostasy, which after Coleridge has become the ticket of admission into the clerisy, that if we deconstruct Coleridge we deconstruct a deconstruction, return to a scene where we, like that bewildered visionary, wake up embarrassed to discover ourselves apostate, having already fallen from the sunlit world of action into the treacherous moonshine of interpretation.

There is no doubt that Frank Lentricchia has addressed an authentic predicament. I share his wish for a future unconstrained by the figures of the past, his dream of solidarity, and his desire for a capable rhetoric of change. Let me underscore my premise: the ironic conjunction of apostasy and criticism, ineluctable as it appears, is historical, not logical. But its historicity does not mean that critical apostasy is easily overcome. Any reflection, no matter how sweet its scheming, that tempts us to think so is to be resisted, especially when that reflection itself invites us to apostasy: in this case to break faith with de Man and to abjure the demanding project of writing a history of romanticism adequate to our postmodernity. Such a tactic diminishes Lentricchia's project. He wastes his energy and confounds his acts when in the name of a new and improved Kenneth Burke he casts out the supposedly obsolescent Paul de Man; when in the name of local, forceful interventions he promotes schism; when in the name of reality he fashions a melodrama of hero and villain. No more stances, no more scapegoats:

1. Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago, 1983), p. 38; all further references to this work, abbreviated *CSC*, will be included in the text.

2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 120; all further references to this work, abbreviated *R*, will be included in the text.

3. This symposium was first published in 1970 under the title *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, 1970); it was reprinted in 1972 as *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*.

4. See Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 173–209.

5. Lentricchia displays a curious blindness to the problem of romanticism. He rightly observes that when in his essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity" de Man writes "literature" others might "say more modestly 'romantic literature'" (CSC, p. 47). The same substitution might be performed on de Man's use of the word "modern." Lentricchia seems to think that pointing to the substitution discredits it, whereas it merely opens the question, surely in de Man's mind, of the possibility of rewriting all literary history since the end of the eighteenth century as an elaboration of a few central romantic preoccupations or tropes.

6. In an 1802 letter to William Sotheby, Coleridge writes "'Εσθησε signifies—*He hath stood*—which in these times of apostasy from the principles of Freedom, or of Religion in this country, & from both by the same persons in France, is no unmeaning Signature, if subscribed with humility, & in the remembrance of, Let him that stands take heed lest he fall—. However, it is in truth no more than S. T. C. written in Greek. *Es tee see*—." In his note to this passage Earl Leslie Griggs observes that "'Εσθησε signifies 'He hath placed' not 'He hath stood'. The word should have been 'Εσθηκε, but then the play on Coleridge's initials would have been lost. Elsewhere he called it 'Punic Greek'" (*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Griggs, 6 vols. [Oxford, 1956–71], 2:867 and 867 n. 1). Taking his stand on the etymon that is his proper signature requires Coleridge to put in place that which he is to stand on, to stand off his name in order that his name may be a standing place. That apostasy is simultaneously a theft (under the cover of resemblance) of the proper meaning of 'Εσθηκε and its surreptitious importation into 'Εσθηε. The diachronic gesture serves a wholly antihistorical strategy. For Coleridge the signature and the self which it underwrites are strategies.

7. E. P. Thompson, review of David V. Erdman, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Essays on His Times*, Wordsworth Circle 10 (Summer 1979), p. 263; and see his "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon" in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Dean Vannech (New York, 1969), pp. 149–82. I say "renewed severity" because in "Disenchantment" Thompson self-ironically retracts his earlier "sneer" in *The Making of the English Working Class* at the "sincerity of Coleridge's professions" of fear at what he and other radicals might suffer at the hands of patriotic rioters in Nether Stowey in 1798 (see p. 162).

8. Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1970), 2:152, 39. Burke was not the only person subjected to this sort of ideological critique by Coleridge. Like other epithets, such as "plagiarist," which Coleridge both feared and cherished, the tag of "apostate" was not frugally applied. For an early example, see his denunciation of Robert Southey for the "Apostasy" of his decision to abandon pantisocracy for the bar (Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 1:163–73). A later and more indirect example would be the treatment of Wordsworth in the second volume of the *Biographia Literaria*, where, in effect, the poet is accused of apostasy from the divine truth of his genius.

9. William Hazlitt, "Illustrations of the *Times* Newspaper," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930–34), 7:135.

10. Early versions of Coleridge's "shaking off" occur in prose in his letters to his clerical brother George (see esp. Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 1:125–27) and in poetry in the 1796 "Eolian Harp." In its final, 1817 version, "The Eolian Harp" displays a double apostasy: a turn from connubial fidelity and the domestic "Cot" to an autoerotically charged fairy fancy and a turn from that scene, now characterized in speculative, pantheistic terms, to "pensive Sara." The material artifact of the poem itself registers Coleridge's retirement in the country, a turn away from political activism.

11. As the editor of the *Marginalia* indicates, these marginalia, comprising a long series of return engagements with Jakob Böhme's texts, are difficult to date, although most fall within the period 1817–18. But the congruence of the language of those under consideration here with notebook entries of 1818 allows us to place them with some confidence near that year. See Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 12 (in 5 vols.) of 16 (Princeton, N.J., 1980), 1:553–54. All further

references to *Marginalia*, abbreviated *M* and with volume, page, and entry numbers, will be included in the text.

12. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1957–73), vol. 3, pt. 1, entry 4449.

13. This is the crucial metaphysical problem for Coleridge. See Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford, 1969). Compare the aborted Schellingian formulation in chapter thirteen of Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7 (in 2 vols.) of 16 (Princeton, N.J., 1983), 1:296–300. All further references to this work, abbreviated *BL* and with volume and page numbers, will be included in the text.

14. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, vol. 3, pt. 1, entry 4449; here I rely on Coburn's translation of Coleridge's Greek.

15. For a subtle treatment of this aspect of Coleridge, see Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), esp. pp. 21–60.

16. J. G. A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1973), p. 227.

17. See Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," pp. 229–30.

18. See de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), p. 273; all further references to this work, abbreviated *AR*, will be included in the text.

19. Cf. Blackstone: "LIFE is the immediate gift of God, a right inherent by nature in every individual; and it begins in contemplation of law as soon as an infant is able to stir in the mother's womb" (*Commentaries on the Laws of England by William Blackstone*, 4 vols. [Oxford, 1765], 1:125).

20. I stress English history to distinguish it, as does Burke, from French. In certain respects my commentary on Burke renders *Reflections* as akin to the paradoxical formulation of Rousseau in *The Social Contract*: "The people subject to the Law must be the authors of the Law." De Man observes, "Only a subterfuge can put this paralysis in motion. Since the system itself had to be based on deceit, the mainspring of its movement has to be deceitful as well" (*AR*, p. 274). What is apt for Rousseau would be wrong for Burke just because the evaluative terms of subterfuge and deceit are inappropriate for an argument that embraces theatricality as a determinant of the English character and English history. For Burke it is because the French do not have either the English theater or the English common law tradition that they must resort to a deceit for motivation out of paralysis.

21. *On a Motion Made in the House of Commons . . . for a Committee to Enquire into the State of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament*, quoted in Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," p. 228.

22. The editors' translation of "*nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu, . . . praeter ipsum intellectum*" (*BL* 1:141 and 141 n. 1).

23. Burke, "Letter to a Noble Lord," *Selected Writings of Edmund Burke*, ed. Bate (New York, 1960), p. 487.

24. For an application of Hartleian associationism to the philosophical and rhetorical problem of the self-producing and self-reading text which takes up the issue of narcissism in relation to Coleridge's "The Garden of Boccaccio," see my essay, "Philosophy/Literature: The Associationist Precedent for Coleridge's Late Poems," in *Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. William E. Cain (Lewisburg, Pa., 1984), pp. 27–50.

25. De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1971), p. 106; all further references to this work, abbreviated *BI*, will be included in the text.

26. Evidence that this is de Man's aim would be the substitution in the late *Allegories of Reading* of the rhetorical categories "metonymy" and "metaphor" for the suspiciously intentional nouns "flight" and "return" used in the early *Blindness and Insight*.

27. N.B.: This must be not a complete cancellation of the more arbitrary terms: although it is by the necessity and purposiveness of our separation that we attest to poetry's merit, it is by the contingency and compulsiveness of that movement that the critic witnesses to poetry's "genuine power."

28. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2 vols. (London, 1930), 1:37, 2:273 (paraphrased).