Romantic Sobriety

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History.

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We might say that in deconstruction history is always posed as a question, at once urgent, ubiquitous, and insoluble, whereas ideological demystification conceives of its relation to history as an answer, a solution, to its critical hermeneutic. Certainly, this critical truism has special force in Romantic studies, a field very much shaped by the complex relation between deconstruction and ideological critique over the last forty years. But it could just as well be said that the full implications of this relation are especially clarified by the field of Romantic studies, not least because its object of study replays the tensions between these two modes of inquiry. Studying Romanticism means knowing it as a historical period but also knowing it as a figure that stands for something else: an aesthetic practice, a form of consciousness, a political aspiration, an ideology, the possibility of historicity itself. That as a figure Romanticism can be either transhistorical or tied to its historical identity makes its situation all the more complicated, and compelling. Romanticism especially dramatizes the interlocking relation between period identity and trope, and the investment of literary studies in that dynamic. In chapter 1’s concluding reading of Coleridge, we used the figure of Romantic sobriety to elucidate the problem of Romanticism’s identity, where the impossible task of steadfastly affirming the truth of Romanticism becomes a figure for the inescapably fantastic event of Romanticism itself. Here we can extend the paradoxical energies of that reading by reformulating the problem of realizing Romanticism as one specifically about conceptualizing historical periodicity and assert that Romanticism is the period metaphor that both stabilizes and disrupts the very concept of period metaphors. The deconstruction and demystification of Romanticism is very much about the deconstruction and demystification of history, its existence as either question or calculation, trope or immanent being.
But even as Romanticism asserts its special relation to history, it must also confront an opposite trajectory, how its meaning is best understood through a constellation of other larger historical identities, such as the Enlightenment and modernity itself. We can, then, continue probing the relationship between Romanticism and the long eighteenth century begun by chapter 1, by considering how the potential disciplinary reorganization of Romanticism into the long eighteenth century becomes one vivid academic expression of the question, where does the historical specificity of Romanticism reside, within itself or something larger, or both?

Sorting this issue out is certainly a historical proposition, but as Romanticism’s special relation to history reminds us, it is also, in Paul de Man’s sense, rhetorical. Which is to say, Romanticism’s relation to history is, paradoxically, not special—or, more precisely, it is a trope for something pervasive among all the period fields of literary studies, insofar as they remain particular and distinct from one another. This includes those historical entities that might subsume or entangle with Romanticism itself, that would enact historicity by absorbing a field so intent on both the enabling and worrying of historical thought. Approached tropologically, the relation of Romanticism to these larger historical periods is not simply about events and formations that constitute the boundaries of historical identities. It is also about best identifying and clarifying the workings of figure that create the intelligence of such periodicity.

Such labor, what de Man designated innocently enough by the term “reading,” calls for its own crossing of a particular set of boundaries. A philosophical text, generated by the entanglement between Romanticism and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, might contain sections exemplary in their recording of the interstice between trope and historical periodization. Immanuel Kant’s short meditation on genius in the third *Critique* is, like the rest of his book, about the limits and possibilities of the judging subject; his words on genius are also specifically about the artistically creative subject. In resolving the contradictions between aesthetic judgment and creation, Kant transforms the solar light of human genius into the historical genius of the Enlightenment, which is very much the linguistic genius of Romanticism. In this reading the force of Kant’s genius becomes the “strange light” of Romanticism opined by T. E. Hulme in the last chapter, the historicity of which we “can never do without,” whose intractability is like the entrenched “effect of a drug” (127). This all occurs, however, in a register not of consciousness or of historical truth, but of something else before either’s constative realization.

Kant’s text is especially telling in its reflexive expression of this situation, so
much so that it helps illuminate the sharp distinction between deconstruction and ideological demystification. For if deconstruction always poses history as the pressure of an insoluble, omnipresent question, it does so through figure, before truth. In contrast, ideological demystification, with its answers to the questions of history’s meaning, always feels the gravitational pull toward truth and falsehood. Insofar as the relation between deconstruction and ideological critique in Romantic studies helps elucidate some of the intellectual circumstances behind the field’s present engagement with the long eighteenth century, Kant’s meditation on genius and its light clarifies one consequence of Romanticism’s potential absorption by the larger historical identity, the extent to which that subsumption cannot happen, regardless of whether Romanticism the term survives. That subsumption will not happen if it is meant as the truth of a purely historical comprehension, because the historical in Romanticism is always something besides that act.

If, indeed, such a period reorganization was simply and purely to occur—that would indicate a disciplinary narrative tantamount to the conflation of deconstruction in Romantic studies with its leftist cousin. We could conceive of such a narrative fairly easily, one that in its own way would describe the arc of Romantic studies since the 1970s. It would begin with Paul de Man’s deconstructive readings of Wordsworth, Rousseau, and other Romantic writers, in which a number of themes associated with them, such as the power of symbol over allegory and the organic unity of mind and nature, were radically problematized. It would continue in the 1980s with Jerome McGann’s ideological critique of such Romantic concepts and others, such as the celebration of Romantic genius, imagination, and transcendence of history. It would further continue into the 1990s, where with the especially added impetus of feminist concerns, such traditional Romantic terms are perceived to be not only ontologically but also, more importantly, ideologically suspect, limiting our understanding of both the history of Romantic writing and the social concerns of an array of authors other than the six major poets. Such a disciplinary narrative might also note how de Man’s work stressed the ontological and epistemological bad faith of the Romantic topos; the social consequences of such a focus implicitly hovered around his arguments but remained elliptical and open-ended. In contrast, the work of McGann and others stressed articulating those ideological consequences as precisely and completely as possible.

Acknowledging the bad faith of the Romantic topos was a means to securing the ends of this more sociohistorical inquiry. It was also a bad faith that was cal-
culable. Using a de Manian distinction, we might say that McGann’s Romantic ideology expressed the intelligibility of a mistake, as opposed to the more complicated deconstructive condition that de Man called error. For many since then, it might be observed, this distinction has, for the most part, disappeared: we understand the deconstruction of the Romantic topos to be basically the demystification of the Romantic ideology; deconstruction is a means toward exposing and rectifying an ideological mistake.

It could also be noted that de Man’s deconstruction of Romanticism was more precisely a critique of the conception of Romanticism that was held by such twentieth-century scholars as M. H. Abrams and Earl Wasserman. In arguing with these critics, de Man’s proof was the work of the Romantic writers themselves. The 1970s deconstruction of Romanticism was never a simple dismissal of Romanticism; indeed, in much of de Man’s work there exists the desire not only to question but also to preserve, in no matter how vexed a historical or linguistic form, something called Romanticism. McGann also argued that Romantic-era writings could many times provide the best critiques of the Romantic ideology that was also found in such works and later generations of Romantic readers. But if McGann, like de Man, also keenly engaged with twentieth-century Romantics such as M. H. Abrams, the larger consequence of McGann’s scholarship and other sociohistorical work following him was to equate the Romantic period with the Romantic ideology. This would lead to the main point of the disciplinary narrative, that, consequently, the demystification of Romanticism has always implied, even more so than deconstruction, the dissolution of Romanticism, into a multiplicity of Romantic ideologies or some new historical identity altogether. Until the rise of the long nineteenth century, the most visible candidate for this new identity was, of course, the long eighteenth century. The transformation in Romantic studies of deconstruction into demystification would thus converge with the dissolution of Romanticism as an ideological and historical entity, as well as the absorption of its writers and texts by the larger, historically more capacious field.

The first part of this short account needs major qualification, insofar as it overlooks the continuing number of Romanticist scholars who have in fact combined historicist and deconstructive work, while staying keenly aware of their difference. (To the degree that critics assume deconstruction to serve a historicist inquiry, of course, the opposite is true.) Likewise, the first part minimizes how much critics understand ideology as something more complicated than a mistake or falsehood, the rectifiable condition of false consciousness. Still, the transformation in Romantic studies of deconstruction into demystification has a certain
persuasiveness, not least because of its exemplary nature as an allegory for all literary studies since the 1970s, as it retells how the deconstruction of literature evolves, or falls, into the sociohistorical study of literature and culture. And, as a 1990s Blackwell anthology of Romantic criticism illustrates, there are institutionalized accounts of the field that very much allegorize its return to history through the marginalization of deconstruction in the study of Romanticism. Yet the instructive value of the disciplinary narrative really inheres in its second part, in the putative convergence between the appearance of the long eighteenth century and the confl ation of deconstruction with demystification. For if that convergence is true, deconstruction should have nothing to say about the proposition of the long eighteenth century, something that Romanticists will confront as simply an issue of history, and not of figure, regardless of how much the long eighteenth century might now find itself superseded by the long nineteenth century in Romantic studies. Not surprisingly, the situation turns out to be more complicated than that.

Of course, there are no “simple” issues of history, with or without figure. The reasons for the possible reorganization of Romanticism into the long eighteenth century were many and complex, and they had as much to do with limited resources for the study of literature in a global economy as the research of scholars in either field. The consequences of this reperiodization are equally many, not the least being the professional question of how best to train and prepare students to work in a field that is, at a number of levels, being transformed. At the same time those students and their teachers have, through the perspective of the long eighteenth century, been given the opportunity to rethink and reconfigure a number of issues: the concerns and literary styles of late eighteenth-century female authors, the ongoing presence in British Romantic culture of earlier social formations, such as Pocock’s civic republicanism, and the connection between Romantic writing and the larger global history of the British empire, to name a few. The study of Romanticism continues to confront all these issues, and it is safe to say that the field will be dealing with them for some time.

The politics of such a study become especially complex. For if the demystification of Romanticism conceives of its relation to history as an answer, the shorthand name for that solution for much of the 1980s and 1990s was the French Revolution, the key term for understanding the domestic and foreign concerns, the social texture, of especially British Romantic writing and culture. Playing off this view of McGann and others, Alan Liu did complicate the Revolution as ultimate referent through a French revisionist historiography that made the Revolution the sign of indeterminacy between culture and text (138–63). Still, the Revo-
volution was a weighty presence in the field, in many ways the organizing principle behind it. It still is today a central tenet in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century studies. But the equivalence between the Revolution and the Romantic period, the way in which one acted as a sign for the other, is not as dominant as it once was in our historiography. The Revolution is now being contextualized as part of a larger set of sociohistorical processes; instead of viewing it as a primal scene inaugurating a new Romantic spirit of the age, we are now beginning to consider it and its effects on Great Britain in continuity with a number of social formations already at work in British history. As much as this recontextualization has engendered attempts to expand Romanticism’s historical boundaries, other historical formations, such as the long eighteenth century, have also been proposed as a replacement for the Romantic period. This is one answer to the critical hermeneutic implicit in the demystification of Romanticism: a more complex and capacious historical identity that explains the culture and society of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England better than Romanticism itself.

Coincidentally, a certain Jacobin disposition underpinning the work of McGann and others has become less dominant as the French Revolution has been absorbed by the long eighteenth century’s larger historical span. While in part the welcome consequence of the broadening and deepening of political issues involving this larger historical period, this occurrence has also meant a certain dilution of one normative assumption of the earlier historicist work, the equivalence between the critical activities of historicization and politicization that characterized the late twentieth-century Romanticist scholar as both Revolutionary sympathizer and contemporary oppositional critic. Ironically, the dissolution of the Romantic ideology has affected the political assumptions behind the demystifying goals of the 1980s ideological critique, since the long eighteenth century, for example, is at once more socially complex and historically distant, insofar as the study of this period is no longer so intensely structured by the question of our own political connection to the Revolution, of whether in our present that seminal event is ongoing or indeed “over.” The long eighteenth century is oddly more global, more nominalist, and less totalizing than the more concentrated Romantic period.

This is also the case at least in part because of one way that both Romanticism and the eighteenth century currently register the volatility of modernity. This concept has always been violent because, like Romanticism, the historicity of modernity is both a figure and a period. Indeed, I explore elsewhere how modernity is the very trope of historical difference, a condition that actually enables history through its fantastic, or tropological, character (Fantastic, 3–4). But, of course,
modernity is also preeminently Enlightenment modernity, the far-reaching period term that in many ways enables Romanticism's historical coordination with the long eighteenth century. What needs particular remarking is how this period term has increasingly grown in complexity and contradiction; as a period term Enlightenment modernity has come to stand for a history that is radically nominalist, multiple, and untotalizable. As simply a period it now already is volatile. The dispersion of the Romantic ideology into many Romantic ideologies, and into such new historical formations as the long eighteenth century; the dissolution of the political role of today's oppositional critic as simply Jacobin opponent to the Romantic ideology—all these events reflect this new historical understanding of modernity itself.

It would be tempting to see this historical situation in all its radical indeterminacy as the convergence of tropology and periodicity, of deconstruction and ideological critique, of, in fact, the boundaries between Romanticism and Enlightenment modernity. To some degree this is true. But as powerful a model as this situation is, it and its attendant historical knowledge also operate in a different valence than the concept of Romanticism as both simultaneously period and trope. Enlightenment modernity is the historical period that in its complexity resists the uniformity, the very identity, of periodicity. Romanticism is the period metaphor that as a trope makes history into something besides simply history. This distinction is crucial. It is also, paradoxically, highly problematic.

The difference is problematic not simply because Romanticism, as a historical period under reorganization, functions within the historical multiplicity of Enlightenment modernity. The difference is also problematic to the extent that Enlightenment modernity, for all its radically nominalist historicity, still at some level coheres around the figure, or figures, of a particular identity. For that is what especially marks the tropological character of Romanticism: not simply, as one might suspect, the decomposition of sign and meaning, but, more vertiginously, the performance of sign and meaning at the simultaneous moment of decomposition. Romanticism is historical because it is figural, because it stands for something, because it insists on the metonymic relays of signification, prescription, and description. Romanticism is the trope of a fantastic modernity as well as a period term. Enlightenment modernity is that fantastic trope as well, which means that it, like all historical periods, no matter how complex or indeterminate, is also a Romantic proposition.

Romanticism is the figure of our investment in history, of history as a cathexis. As Marc Redfield keenly observes, this explains in part how overdetermined the
disciplinary title of McGann’s seminal work is, why it had to be about the Romantic, and not the eighteenth-century or Victorian or Modern, ideology, even though similar ideological critiques occur in those and other numerous literary fields (149). Romanticism’s strange status also explains why, paradoxically, debates about its historicity are ideological, why, as I observed in the previous chapter, we argue about not only whether Romanticism did happen but also whether it should have happened, whether, politically or ethically, we should consider it to have happened. The extent to which a historically objective position cannot make sense of these propositions is the degree to which the operations of figure underwrite the assumptions of historicity embedded in Romanticism’s ideological critique. Romanticism is the trope of a particular identity, and value, in history.

Conversely, if Romanticism can indeed be simply folded back into the long eighteenth century of a non-totalizing Enlightenment modernity, if deconstruction now, like demystification, simply serves the goal of historical comprehension, this peculiar dimension to Romanticism will likewise disappear, as it will have only been a specific sociohistorical condition of Romanticism’s own study. If this is not the case, however, the study of figure should have something to say about the period reorganization. Certainly, the question of Romanticism’s relation to what came before it—the Enlightenment, the eighteenth century, long or otherwise—is fraught and unwieldy, already in only historical terms. In terms of figure the challenge is no less complex. But such a study can begin to formulate its own grounds of inquiry by recognizing how much figure indelibly marks the period relation, not only Romanticism but also both other terms—modernity, certainly, but also the Enlightenment, in an especially manifest, almost awkwardly obvious way, in English at least. The Enlightenment is the period of light, the act of light on, and as, a period.

To move away from Enlightenment modernity toward a discussion of Romanticism and the Enlightenment is already a troping of sorts. But while within historical terms this abstraction might too easily simplify the problem of the larger, more complex field, as a move about rhetoric it has the merit of providing a point of entry for an analysis fundamentally contrary, but also inextricably linked, to the historicist approach. Certainly the topos of Enlightenment is rich in ideological and sociohistorical meaning. But as a topos, it also vehemently demonstrates the logic of manifest meaning itself, of the enactment of ontological and epistemological clarity that defines the agency of Enlightenment as both human consciousness and historical era. Indeed, the enactment of that clarity is the
very historical action of that era, a condition of knowledge that also models the clarifying force enabling all historical periodization. To understand that force both as and through figure is to approach the Enlightenment’s historical nature as precisely a Romantic idea.

In a philosophic text appropriately famous for troubling the divide between Romanticism and the Enlightenment, the name for this enactment of manifest meaning is genius, a term long central to the study of the high Romantic subject, although now often dismissed as one idol of that same subject’s ideological mystification. Exemplary in their precision, several short passages from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* inscribe genius within the workings of sun and luminosity. In doing so, the *Critique* connects genius to light’s phenomenal blending of identity and action. Genius implicitly becomes (the) Enlightenment, the predication of human cognition as a discernible human endeavor and collective historical event. The text’s account of genius is not, however, philosophic, much less historic, or phenomenal, truth. What occurs is an illumination, nevertheless, something resistant to the simple dampening power of an ideological critique; if Romanticism is the trope for history’s value, Kant clarifies the genius behind that trope.

Must one consent in the end (or at the beginning) that the “consciousness” that pure reflection is, i.e., sensation, is unconscious like “nature”?

—Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*

Regardless of the previous chapter’s distinction between Kantian *Nüchternheit* and *Vernunft*, we might respond to Lyotard with this formulation: the genius of the Enlightenment is the emergence of a calm, sober intelligence that is paradoxically figured through an overwhelming solar sensation, which tells us less about any phenomenal state than about the drive of figure itself. While one could certainly talk about the sober dimensions of Kant’s definition of beauty—of the separation of beauty from the perceptually pleasing—within the context of this chapter our focus lies elsewhere. Fittingly, then, Kant’s discussion of genius occurs within his thoughts on the sublime, whose machinations arguably constitute the Kantian candidate for yet another sense of Romantic sobriety, a dialectical show of reason both steady and dizzying at once. Chapter 7 will exploit this sense of the vertiginous in our own extraction of Shelley’s revolutionary sublime from his “Ode to the West Wind,” which is characterized especially by the poem’s sober
attempt to perform a historical intelligence ultimately independent of phenomenal experience. The concluding section to the present chapter will likewise recall the sublime's encounter with dizzying infinite thought, as well as its oftentimes antagonistic relation to the senses, insofar as Kant's examples of genius are beholden neither to the phenomenal world nor to the mind, but to the luminous violence of language. But we begin in this section with another dimension of the problematic of the sublime (and the beautiful) in Kant, the dilemma of human art, which frames the question of how exactly the notion of genius fits into the third Critique.:

Coming late in the first part of Kant's work, in the discussion of aesthetic judgment, the five short sections on genius do not seem central to the thinker's overarching argument. Then again, the structure of that argument is notoriously difficult to identify, especially with regard to resolving how different portions of Kant's book relate to one another in terms of importance and argumentative development. The third Critique invites us to ponder the meaning of its main split between aesthetic and teleological judgment, as well as the significance of the divisions in aesthetic judgment between the beautiful and the sublime and nature and art. Much critical and narrative energy has been spent explaining the relations among these different topics in Kant's work. Indeed, we usually evaluate interpretations of the third Critique by the persuasiveness of the narratives created out of these different portions of Kant's book. That we have so many narratives of the third Critique speaks to how much its philosophical richness coincides with the reoccurring possibility of its discontinuous nature.

One conventional narrative separates Kant's chapters on genius from the first part of his book, the discussion of taste in the "Analytic of the Beautiful." Traditionally, thinkers have been interested in both sections of Kant's aesthetics, but have rarely studied them together. The reason for this separation is easy to see, as the theory of taste refers to the world of nature while the theory of genius refers to the world of art. But, of course, the relation between nature and art becomes, in spite of Kant's prose, one of the key themes of his work. Commentators of the third Critique have noticed the fitful, almost reluctant way its discussion of aesthetics moves from nature to art (Cohen and Guyer, 7–10). It's tempting to see this textual clumsiness as a moment when biography and philosophy coincide, as Kant's own notorious antipathy toward all the arts except poetry has been well documented. Still, Kant does move his discussion from nature to art; the process begins almost imperceptibly in the "Analytic of the Sublime," the section of the book in which the sections on genius reside.
Like the beautiful, the sublime is mostly discussed through examples of nature. But while a natural object can be beautiful, it can't, strictly speaking, be sublime. Rather, the sublime describes those powers within us that rise above what threatens us from the outer world: “All we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind.” Even as it focuses on the power of the outer, natural world, the Kantian sublime shifts the aesthetic discussion away from perceptual forms to a more explicit consideration of the human mind, to, as Eva Schaper adumbrates, “ideas of reason and aesthetic ideas” (385). Like his sections on the sublime, Kant's later discussion on human art also confronts the possibility of aesthetic conception, even as art is defined by its beauty, precisely that which resists conceptualization. A consideration of artistic beauty invariably leads to the matter of its creation, which leads to questions of intentions, rules, and concepts; like examples of the sublime, beautiful art cannot avoid the explicit workings of the mind. But examples of artistic beauty, like those of natural beauty, are also perceptual forms whose judgment as beautiful eschews understanding them conceptually as beautiful things—indeed, just as for Kant sublimity does not reside in the natural object, neither does beauty reside in the concept.

The work of art challenges, perhaps scandalizes, the categories and oppositions that underpin Kant’s prior discussion of the beautiful and the sublime. The discontinuity between beauty and conception is one of the key claims of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”: judging something as beautiful means judging it without the aid of a concept that would a priori designate that object as beautiful. As Kant argues, judging something as beautiful involves a claim to “subjective universality”: “since a judgment of taste involves the consciousness that all interest is kept out of it, it must also involve a claim to being valid for everyone, but without having a universality based on concepts” (sec. 6, 54). As difficult as this claim regarding “subjective universality” might be, Kant is quite clear in defining it by what it is not, a universality based on objective concepts. The judgment of the universal beauty of an object occurs independently of our concept of that object. Much later, during his discussion of art and nature, Kant does not back down from this earlier claim: “For we may say universally, whether it concerns beauty in nature or in art: beautiful is what we like in merely judging it (rather than either in sensation proper or through a concept)” (sec. 45, 174).

This reiteration is crucial, since, unlike natural objects, artistic objects are the results of human creation. Beautiful natural objects are products of nature; hence, they can exhibit, in Kant's famous phrase, a “purposiveness without purpose”—a design or form without intention (sec. 10, 65). Indeed, the second half of the
Critique, its study of teleological judgment, is primarily concerned with the dangers of assuming that humans can authoritatively know that intention in nature exists. Any such attempt invariably confuses human purpose with nature, letting a human concept stand in for a natural object. As Kant says much earlier in his “Analytic of the Beautiful,” a purpose is the “object of a concept. . . . We think of a purpose if we think not merely, say, of our cognition of the object, but instead of the object itself (its form, or its existence), as an effect that is possible only through a concept of that effect” (sec. 10, 64–65)—hence the radical appeal of Kant’s aesthetics to some readers, whereby to judge something as beautiful is to confront dramatically the error of “subreption,” the confusion of human conception with objective truth, the very limiting nature of human thought.  

But art objects, as products of human creation, cannot free themselves completely from human design, conception, and purpose. As Kant bluntly states, “If the object is given as a product of art, and as such is to be declared beautiful, then we must first base it on a concept of what the thing is [meant] to be” (sec. 48, 179). Kant is referring to the specific character of mimetic art, but his statement encapsulates a more general predicament about art and taste that his larger argument must also confront. Making something beautiful certainly means judging something as beautiful, but the process also paradoxically means considering the presence of purpose and conception in the art object, negating the defining trait of a judgment of beauty. As Kant says in his famous comparison, “Nature . . . is beautiful [schön] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [schön] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature” (sec. 45, 174). The sentence is not as dialectical as it first appears. In both clauses art remains associated with a purpose before purposiveness. In the first clause we only know nature’s beauty by a purposiveness that resembles the human intentionality that makes art; in the second clause we must be aware of this intentional character in art even as it resembles the purposiveness without purpose of the beautiful in nature. Nature might simulate art, but art’s simulation of nature is kept in check by art’s reflexive relation to itself.  

The emphatic reiteration in section 45 of the discontinuity between beauty and conception highlights the paradoxical and fitful connection that art has to Kant’s study of taste. How can art and art’s creation be beautiful, if the making of art brings back the relation to conception that beauty eschews? If our awareness of art as art keeps in check art’s dissolution into nature, what keeps in check art’s dissolution into itself, into a circumscribed identity of rules and concepts totally alienated from the beauty of nature? What prevents human aesthetics from being an impossibility, an acute moment of subreption, in Kant’s own Critique?
The answer, of course, is the human talent of genius. With it Kant creates an entirely new backdrop for his discussion, upon which the threatening contradictions of his analysis seem to disappear:

*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: *Genius* is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (sec. 46, 174)

The artist's genius allows his or her art to be made through a rule, to be conceived artistically. In fact, art's rule is conceived through genius. For genius is always original, quite like beauty's judgment, in that both are independent of any prior rule or concept. Through genius something like a rule or concept, but not a rule or concept, is given, thereby realizing the artistic creation of beauty. Genius allows Kant to distinguish between judging an object as beautiful, which requires taste, and making a beautiful object, which requires genius. Moreover, for Kant, the difference between original genius and original *nonsense* is the exemplary nature of genius's creations: “hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, [such products of genius] must serve others for this purpose, i.e. as standard or rule by which to judge” (sec. 46, 175). As the bearer of such a standard, Kant's genius might inspire the genius of other artists or, just as likely, influence less-talented individuals who will codify the creations of genius into a school of precepts and rules that invite emulation. Kant's genius thus gives rule to art in two ways: first, as the originary non-rule that allows beautiful art to resolve the contradiction between its conceptual and non-conceptual character; and second, as the non-rule that becomes an ordinary rule for artistic schools of imitation.

There is also a third way that genius gives rule to art, which Kant points to when he reformulates genius as the “innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.” Nature gives rule to art through genius, since the human artist and his or her talent already belong to nature. Kant's reconciliation of the conceptual and non-conceptual traits of artistic beauty is repeated in this rapprochement between the purposive rule of art and the non-intentional design of natural beauty, with the former actually being an effect of the latter, a dynamic mediated by human genius. This mediation by genius anticipates the conclusion to the first part of the *Critique*, which resolves the antinomy of taste, itself a revisiting of the problematic relation between taste and conception. Kant's solution is the “indeterminate concept” of the “supersensible substrate” of all phenomenal reality on which judgments of taste are based (sec. 57,
The indeterminate concept resolves the conflict between the conceptual and non-conceptual in the judgment of beauty while also, like genius’s mediation of nature, shifting Kant’s aesthetic discussion from epistemology toward metaphysics and ethics, a process completed in his concluding claims about beauty as a symbol of the good in this first part of the *Critique*—hence the conservative appeal of Kant’s aesthetics to some, who see in the rule given to art by genius a theme reiterated in a number of places of the *Critique*, the active presence of a morally grounding nature in human life (Zammito, 283–84). Far from being an ancillary moment in Kant’s discussion, the synthetic role of the genius replays one of the professed central projects of his work, connecting through aesthetic judgment the realms of pure and practical reason, or of philosophical understanding and ethics.

Whether this argument ultimately belongs to Kant or to just some of his readers, many have also been skeptical of it, either citing the artificial and forced progression toward the resolution of the antinomy of taste, the somewhat strained symmetry between this section’s inclusion in the third *Critique* and the “Dialectic” of the first *Critique*, or wondering why Kant makes the indeterminate concept a claim about the “supersensible substrate” rather than of the harmony of the cognitive faculties, which would have more neatly defined the epistemological, rather than ontological, boundaries of Kant’s discussion. This tension is already signaled in Kant’s two formulations of genius, as that which gives rule to art and that by which nature gives rule to art. For it could be argued that genius’s grounding in nature merely begs the question of genius’s ability to give rule to art. (Indeed, distinguishing between taste’s judgmental powers and genius’s creative abilities can already be seen as a deferral of this problem.) If we are not convinced of genius’s ability to solve the epistemological conflict between the conceptual and non-conceptual aspects of artistic beauty, we are not likely to be satisfied by Kant’s transcendental recourse to nature either. If genius resolves this conflict by mediating nature, the question still remains as to how nature can overcome the very distinctions between artistic and natural beauty that make those notions intelligible. Rather than simply grounding the epistemological, the ontological finds itself placed in the same trying predicament as the epistemological, while also highlighting the ontological instabilities of Kant’s epistemological argument. Securing genius through nature does not secure nature, just as securing artistic beauty through genius does not secure genius.

There is thus a tautological sense of rhetorical imposition, rather than of constative reasoning, that characterizes Kant’s invocation of genius and nature, an act that both affirms and makes friable the ontological quality of his argument.
(What enables artistic beauty?—genius. What is genius?—that which enables artistic beauty.) The implications of this rhetorical sense have not been thought through fully enough, probably because of its limited role in helping us decide what would seem to be most pressing about Kant’s resolution of the problem of artistic beauty, the true or false existence of genius. If we accept Kant’s solution of genius and nature, we ignore this tautological sense in order to secure the ontological and ethical dimensions to Kant’s aesthetics. If we disagree with Kant’s claim about genius, the imposed quality of his claim becomes a sign of occulted thought, Kant’s own lapse into subreption, that then can be dismissed as falsehood, a gesture that very much connects philosophical argument with forms of ideological demystification in Romantic studies and elsewhere. Genius and nature are idols of the mind that the tautological sense of Kant’s thought accidently helps to unmask. As such, this rhetorically imposed quality is simply that, one step in a much larger project, whether that be ascertaining the larger values of Kant’s philosophical argument or discovering the socially constructed character of his, or Romanticism’s, vocabulary.

However, the rhetorically assertive nature of Kant’s use of genius allows for another response to his text, one that sidesteps the central philosophical question of whether to accept his claims as true. Genius might very well not secure artistic beauty through the synthetic manner that Kant describes. But its role as an answer to a problem that Kant’s system of thought cannot otherwise overcome also implies a reorganization of that system, in which the demands for ontological, epistemological, and ethical certitude are themselves the a posteriori compulsive effects of rhetorical, or linguistic, performance. Within this reorganized system the non-truth of Kant’s definition of genius does not simply mean that term’s falsehood and its subsequent rejection. Genius cannot be so easily dismissed.

The relation between Kant’s two definitions of genius clarifies this predicament. It is difficult not to see the first formulation sublating into the second. Granted, this process need not simply mean the foundational presence of an ethical nature. One could view nature’s giving rule to art through genius in a more radical manner, whereby nature’s non-conceptual particularity—its rule—extends to the artwork, making the originality of genius a sign of thought-against-itself (or, indeed, making the origin of thought in thought-against-itself). But insofar as this activity centers on the dialectical recuperation of a certain generative insight, this condition still occurs within a constative mode, regardless of its strong form of defamiliarization as a negative dialectic. Another maneuver against thought, at least as equally vehement, would insist on a certain discontinuity between Kant’s two definitions, in which the very need to define genius a second
time implies a tension between the two that the second’s introduction of an all-encompassing nature cannot fully erase. For as much as the first definition might seem to slide into the second, the question of originality resists the completion of that sublation.

Insomuch as nature gives rule to art through genius, genius mediates the originary power of nature for human art. But insomuch as genius gives rule to art, genius is the originary human force that allows the making of beautiful art to reconcile the conceptual and non-conceptual character of that act. Genius is at once original and a mediation. It is precisely this problem of, or solution to, human creativity that makes Kant’s discussion of genius emblematic of numerous works that construct for us the high Romantic conception of the Romantic artist. To accept simply this situation as the confirmation of a traditional high Romantic aesthetic is to ignore once again the imposed nature of a claim about the truth of what genius is. The more urgent question is whether we can then dismiss genius outright because of this constitutive self-conflict as both a mediating and originary identity.

The answer is no, insofar as genius’s paradoxical status as an originary mediation is the imposed force of precisely that which cannot be dismissed. As a mediation of nature, genius involves a dynamic of continuity, substitution, and representation that marks genius as a figure of nature. But what type of figure, what notion of figurality, simultaneously asserts itself as originary? To ask that question is to insist on a certain gap between Kant’s two formulations that then characterizes their continuity as a mutual interference. The result of that interference is a figurality that cannot be dismissed, that comes before epistemology and ontology. Simultaneously, the result is an origin that cannot explain itself, that must always remain secondary insofar as it is a figure for itself, not the truth of itself. Genius is a catachresis, a figure for the imposed character of figure, independent of, inexplicable by, and separate from not simply the semantic field that it inhabits but, more radically, any non-figural, any epistemological or metaphysical, mode of being. Genius solves the problem of artistic beauty in the Critique because it makes that problem one not of truth, but of figure. As Jacques Derrida notes, “The original agency here is the figure of genius” (10). More emphatically, genius is an originary figure for originality. It solves the problem of art’s originality, of art’s originary rule, by imposing itself as figure’s origin for origin’s truth.25

Kant’s answer to the problem of artistic beauty is genius, insofar as the answer is a figure for a truth claim that Kant’s system depends on but cannot know, explain, or accommodate, except as a paradoxically non-signifying, radically exterior figure, a catachresis. His answer is genius, in the sense that it is also a catachrestic
action that lies at the very heart of signification. It is genius because it is nothing else, because nothing else could stand within Kant’s system and make sense. Genius is the figure of making sense as opposed to nonsense, a differentiation that Kant specifically identifies as a duty of genius, except that, as a catachresis, genius is first and foremost the material of non-sense, of meaning unable to reside anywhere except as the performative violence of a figure that exists independently of the system of signification—Kant’s aesthetics—that it saves. Genius is a catachresis for signification, and thus the figure for its impossibility, insofar as it is impossible for Kant’s discussion of aesthetic beauty to say what genius is, except that genius allows Kant’s discussion to say what it is. Genius is the nonsense that makes sense.

Section 49 of the Critique forcefully illustrates this situation. The heady character of this dramatization actually makes the location of genius in Kant’s discussion of the sublime an appropriate one. As my discussion of resemblance and the sensation of meaning in part II further elaborates, the linguistic character of genius’s light also supports the canniness of placing these sections in the “Analytic of the Sublime.” Not coincidentally, then, section 49 explicitly discusses genius through a theory of expression, or signification. Genius is first associated with the “spirit” (Geist) of an artistic creation, a putatively idealist move that seems to contradict the status of genius as figure. But Kant introduces this term in order to relate it to the representation of an aesthetic idea, the “counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea” (sec. 49, 182). This binary further clarifies the troubled relation between artwork and conception. An aesthetic idea is a “presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it” (sec. 49, 182). Conversely, a rational idea is a “concept to which no intuition (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate.” In other words, an aesthetic idea is something that a concept cannot explain, whereas a rational idea is a concept that cannot be imagined.

While apparently emphasizing the gap between art and conception, Kant’s distinction actually allows for a connection between the two. For, as the Critique explains, there can be no one image or intuition that imagines the concept of a rational idea. There can exist, however, a dynamic between a rational idea and a set of images or intuitions. Indeed, the generation of this dynamic and the structural relations among the rational idea and those images constitute the aesthetic idea that, conversely, no one concept or rational idea can explain. The aesthetic idea is the form of the generative, dialectical interplay between these images and the
rational idea. Thus, Kant cites the example of Jupiter's eagle, which, with “lightning in its claws,” is an “attribute of the mighty king of heaven,” one image of the rational idea of the “sublimity and majesty of creation” (sec. 49, 183). Kant’s point is that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence of meaning between Jupiter’s eagle and the rational idea of majesty; rather, the image of the eagle participates in the prompting of the imagination “to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words” (sec. 49, 183). The implicitly sublime experience of this multitude is the aesthetic idea of what we might call “Jupiter,” something that both outpaces and exists in relation to the rational idea of majesty. For Kant genius is the term for the human incitement of an aesthetic idea out of the relations among a rational idea and a number of images or attributes.

For Lyotard, Kant’s genius is thus “crazy with forms and crazy about forms,” a site of no longer pleasant free play but of melancholy anguish, in which “the powers of presentation strain almost to the breaking point; their ratio ceases to provide a feeling of the beautiful, and the object, which occasions the feeling, seems in the end unrecognizable to the concept” (75–76). In contrast, the Kantian philosopher Paul Guyer sees in genius’s dynamic a holistic argument against a simply formalist comprehension of the Critique, insofar as genius unites form and content through its ability to create the richness of aesthetic ideas, meaning animated, or given “spirit,” through the formal interplay of the ideas’ images and intuitions.28 Certainly, Lyotard’s view of genius as a “figural aesthetic of the ‘much too much’ that defies the concept” threatens the stable union of form and meaning in Guyer’s argument, in that form’s “boundless” proliferation could very well imply a basic hostility toward content’s restrictive articulation, the meaning of the aesthetic idea’s structure, the relation among its attributes (76). But as intriguing is the way that Guyer’s synthetic analysis also clarifies the radical paradox explicit in Lyotard’s analysis, of an infinitude of forms chaffing at the finitude of the concept. For what could it mean even to speak of an infinite set of attributes, an infinitude still structured around the expression of a specific identity?

Derrida describes this radical paradox in Kant as the “immaculate commerce” of “economimesis,” a “pure productivity of the inexchangeable” that marks how the infinite forms of the imagination are determined by the economy, the laws and principles, of analogy from which such forms must also be free (9). Unlike Lyotard, both Guyer and Derrida see Kant’s text doing more than simply expressing regret over the impossibility of this dynamic. Surprisingly, Guyer more than Derrida gives us a specific way to understand the precise action of figure in section 49, even as Guyer’s putative synthesis of form and content does away
with the vertiginous generosity of economimesis as a radical trait of aesthetic creativity.

Central to Guyer is Kant’s description of genius as the “happy relation” between how imagination discovers a number of images of a given concept and how it communicates those attributes in a synthetic expression; the happy relation, in Guyer’s view, is between content and form (sec. 49, 185). Others have understood Kant to be actually referring to the happy relation between imagination and understanding in the aesthetic idea, that which then allows imagination to uncover a plentitude of attributes mobilized for the concept’s expression, as opposed, in the rational idea, to simply the concept’s cognition. That commentators of the *Critique* cannot agree with any precision on to what the “happy relation” of genius refers, except that there is a happy relation, is already both telling and troubling.²⁹

But insofar as the happy relation between understanding and imagination enables the rational idea’s successful expression by the aesthetic idea, we can still use Guyer’s categories, his understanding that “genius . . . lies in the ability to produce both form and content and the ‘happy relationship’ between them which makes the former especially successful for the expression of the latter” (360). Unlike Guyer, we can specify this “happy relation” even further, as that which makes the opposition, and interaction, between form and content intelligible from the get-go: figure. More exactly, genius is the sign of a happy figure, a figure that works—a figure that successfully enables the retroactive distinction between, and combination of, form and content. Kant’s argument for aesthetic expression can thus also be understood as a theory of signification, of the operation of tropes. Similarly, his section’s earlier opposition between the words of a rational idea and the images of an aesthetic idea can be subsumed under this larger, more capacious linguistic inquiry into how figure effects form and content, and meaning. Kant’s reminder that this is a poetic as well as pictorial predicament punctuates this point.³⁰

But how, exactly, does genius occur—how do we realize a happy figure? Kant’s three specific examples of how aesthetic ideas represent themselves suggest an answer. Together they make up what Richard Klein has wittily called the “most aesthetic, poetic, the sunniest, happiest page in the whole flinty volume” of the *Critique* (28). Kant’s first instance is the expression of the rational idea of the “majesty of creation,” the aesthetic idea of “Jupiter.” His second example is the “animation” of the rational idea of keeping a “cosmopolitan attitude” even in the face of death, achieved through conjoining this idea with the poetic rendering of a beautiful summer day’s end:
Let us part from life without grumbling or regrets,
Leaving the world behind filled with our good deeds.
Thus the sun, daily course completed,
Spreads one more soft light over the sky;
And the last rays that he sends through the air
Are the last sighs he gives the world for his well-being. (sec. 49, 184)

Kant’s third example refers to how an intellectual concept can also act as an attribute of an aesthetic idea, as virtue does in a poetic description of a beautiful morning: “The sun flowed forth, as serenity flows from virtue.” For Kant the line’s aesthetic deployment of virtue helps create an ensemble of meanings, the elevated sobriety of a “multitude of sublime and calming feelings,” that the rational idea of hopeful anticipation cannot by itself exhaust (sec. 49, 184–85).

Starting with the first example’s focus on the lightning in Jupiter’s eagle’s claws, all three instances noticeably dwell on the articulation of light. The next two examples characterize the precise nature of this image. Light operates in a formalized manner through the setting and rising of the sun, an entity that, as Derrida famously observes, we and philosophy know as the “most natural, most universal, most real, most luminous thing.” Light suffuses both passages, inside and out. The natural cyclical movement of the sun marks a structure of continuity between both examples, as the very idea of animation and Geist is enacted through the third example’s revivification of light by the dawn sun. In Kant’s second example light is everywhere and then nowhere; its movement enables the very intelligibility of this spatial distinction, as well as of a natural temporality that is itself the cosmopolitan lesson of earthly acceptance that the stanza conveys. Echoed and enhanced by the introduction of serenity and virtue in the third example, the orderly procession of sunlight is Geist itself, the natural ability to “apprehend the imagination’s rapidly passing play”—to identify and expand upon cognition’s affinity with phenomenal, affective, and moral reality. Kant’s light is, as both Derrida and Klein indicate, logos itself: analogy as identity, signification as pure, non-contingent being, figure as a natural entity.

Light as logos is not only pervasive; it is generative as well, a condition made explicit by the sun in the last two examples. But the presence of this trait in the extended passage is far from unproblematic. That the light of the first example, the lightning of Jupiter’s eagle, is in dialectical interplay with the rational idea of the majesty of creation already signals this more complex predicament. This situation requires a reformulation of Derrida’s sense of Kant’s sun as the radical generosity of economimesis. It also suggests another reading option than Klein’s,
where he concludes with a thought experiment outside the *Critique* about a different type of reflecting light whose uncertain shimmer deflects the logocentric bias of Kant’s luminosity (39–40). Indeed, the very articulation of bias within Kant is at once more ineluctable and uncertain than first perceived. For if light in all three examples points toward the generative power of figure as a natural entity, light also delineates more specifically the apodictic, self-authorizing character of this power. All three examples involve the performance of a radical command that cannot be reduced to the comprehension of either an intention or thought.

The third example’s analogy between the flowing of the sun and the flowing of serenity from virtue both hides and exemplifies this performative, apodictic moment. To see flowing sunlight as the generation of serenity from virtue is to see it achieve the certitude of an ethical mode of being different from the mindlessness of mere physical existence. But that assurance itself depends on the intrinsic character of nature, the naturalness of an ethical life that replicates the natural flow of the sun. More precisely, for the simile to work, the sun flows from the sun as serenity flows from virtue. The analogy between these two processes thus enables another figure that the light of the sun also hides. Serenity is different from virtue but can also signify it; the figural reorganization of their separate meanings into genetic continuity is allowed by the coincidence between the sun and the sun, the ability of light to command an origin by its assimilation of difference, by the way sunlight is still the sun wherever and whenever it appears. The figural connection between serenity and virtue, enabled by the one flowing sun, is also the figure for the command of figure, for the successful reordering of identity and non-identity, difference and similarity, into the intrinsic signification of a trope.

But the command is empty; there is no prior agency or authority behind it, since in these lines the sun borrows its design from an ethical process that depends on that very same sun for the intelligibility of serenity and virtue’s meaning. In intensely condensed form Kant’s third example gestures toward some of his writings’ most daunting themes within and beyond the *Critique*: how ethics, or virtue, can be something besides an external, arbitrary injunction and, more immediately, how the natural and ethical worlds can be anchored in the same purposiveness, or design. Here, however, the solution of the aesthetic is explicitly presented through the highly problematic function of a sign. Neither sun nor virtue can quite escape the heteronomy of their mutual existence as a figure for the other. Yet it is as an intrinsic, autonomous entity that each paradoxically still insists on the authority of the example’s natural meaning, incontestable as the flow of both light and serenity from solar world and virtuous mind.
The tension between arbitrary command and natural authority is foregrounded even more emphatically in the second example of the setting sun. Regardless of the passage’s cosmopolitan tone of resignation, the intelligibility of the example is still based on the apodictic form of a command (“Let us part from life . . .”) that also exists in the German of the *Critique* (“Laßt uns aus dem Leben . . . weichen . . .”) and the original French of the poem’s writer (“Oui, finissons sans trouble . . .”). The incontestability of the statement comes from one aspect of the analogy structuring the quote, the unavoidable finitude of our lives and the inevitable setting of the sun. Yet the sun also sets with a grace that signals “his well-being” at the moment of his extinction, which is the basis for the same grace of an ethical life well lived “without grumbling or regrets.” This pathetic fallacy is itself the result of the lines’ imposition of a certain symbolic order: we are told to act like the sun, which only makes sense if the sun acts like us, like we are told to act. Kant’s second example is thus more than simply a repetition of human authority inscribing itself within a natural process (of, for example, a king commanding the sun to set or rise); it is equally and more problematically the expression of an incontestable force that does not reside purely in nature. That we are talking about something like an authoritative command becomes clear when we also consider who the writer of these lines is, Kant’s “great king,” the late Frederick the Great of Prussia, patron to artists and philosophers of Europe’s Enlightenment movement (sec. 49, 184).

The kingly presence of Frederick II (and, to a lesser degree, the academic authority of the third example’s writer, J. Ph. L. Wilhof, Duisburg professor of morals) surely signals the sociopolitical character of what up until now might have been perceived as only a philosophical set of problems. Such a sociohistorical approach might not simply note Kant’s notorious self-positioning as a shill for his late monarch; it might also consider Frederick the Great’s contribution to modern state authority as well as, at another level, the difference between a command by him and his successor, the reactionary Frederick William II.34 But a full treatment of such an analysis must also recognize the degree to which the politics of thought—the specificities of its institutionalization, codification, and authorization—refer to neither simply a natural nor a human quandary. The symbolic generation of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment from Frederick II’s poetic command, from his regal expression of a cosmopolitan French imaginary, certainly speaks to the interpenetration of mind and human social history. But that dialectic has another crucial, although asymmetric, coordinate within the context of Kant’s three examples.

When the *Critique* describes how the “king . . . animates his rational idea of a
cosmopolitan attitude,” Kant’s text refers to something more than simply Frederick II’s poetic acumen, something that speaks to the constitutive state of “animation”—of inciting meaning or inspiring life “even at the end of life,” in the mute cycles of nature and the dead objects of language (sec. 49, 184). All three of Kant’s instances of how the aesthetic idea operates revolve around various images of a higher authority—Jupiter, Jupiter’s eagle, Frederick II, the sun, and virtue—that condition the semantic action of the examples. Interacting with the lightning and solar imagery, these images enact the apodictic command behind the self-authority or “majesty” of natural meaning. They reveal the origin of the “happy relation” of genius, or figure, to be a capricious fiat that cannot account for itself in any fundamentally non-contingent manner, a situation that explains the ambiguous reference of the happy relation in Kant for Guyer and others, insofar as figure is its own referent and imposition. Kant’s three examples are the attributes of genius, demonstrating the genius of genius to be what we have earlier called its catachrestic nature. The genius of the animating king is that genius is the king.

Frederick II’s poetic speech act allegorizes the genius of cognition, of enlightened subjectivity. But the existence of his genius as a nominalization, as the act of enlightenment, also allegorizes the performance of historical action, the coherent intelligence of a historical event or period. Cognition, action, and event: the light of genius, the genius of signification condenses these meanings within itself, the drive of Geist. Frederick II literally speaks, or authorizes, the Enlightenment. But this literality is itself the outcome of the drive of figure. To the degree that the Enlightenment rests on such figure, its periodicity is indelibly Romantic, in a manner neither simply proleptic nor anachronistic, if these traits function only as transparent, historical terms. The apodictic genius, the light of the Enlightenment is Romantic insofar as Romanticism signifies the figural operation of the subject in, as well as of, history: the light of the sun as cognition as well as the temporal action of a distinct historical period. The distinction between subject and historical period is itself the result of the linguistic force that Kant’s examples of aesthetic expression convey.

Kant’s three examples are not simply instances of how an aesthetic idea might work; they are also part of an aesthetic idea, insofar as Kant’s formula for such an idea is also a theory of signification. Together Kant’s examples aesthetically express the rational idea of genius as the reliance of identity on a catachresis, of synthetic meaning on the non-meaning of an imposed command, with command itself a trope for the founding semantic intrusion of an external alien figure upon a field of signs. Lyotard’s characterization of the melancholy state of genius in Kant as form’s ultimate ressentiment regarding content would thus be one more
self-reflexive notation of this more difficult condition, which could just as well be
trope through the success of a command as by the estrangement of simply failed
form. Indeed, this failure could itself be seen as another moment of the aesthetic
expression of the rational idea of catachresis, but only to the degree that that
failure is read as a trope, and not as an unquestioned moment in the economy of
philosophical truth. Failure can no more be the truth of form’s inability to mean
than majesty—capricious, beneficent, or otherwise—can be the truth of the un-
conditional, princely power (here or in Heaven) that securities form’s and content’s
“happy relation.” Neither can failure and majesty be simply the same, a point that
sets the narrative course for any sociohistorical interrogation of philosophy’s con-
static effects.

As Kant’s own categories insist, the rational idea of catachresis is not, strictly
speaking, genius in and of itself, insofar as “no [determinate] concept can be
adequate” to the aesthetic idea that expresses it (sec. 49, 182). Neither, however, is
genius simply that aesthetic expression. The dialectical interplay of Kant’s exam-
pies, or images, of genius, its aesthetic expression, distributes genius throughout
the section (indeed, throughout the Critique) while simultaneously preventing
any ultimate access to this “happy relation.” The concept of figure is not figure;
neither is the figure of figure. Genius cannot capture itself. Genius does not sim-
ply mark the truth of figure as content or of figure as form; nor, as Guyer suggests,
does genius simply enable the natural synthesis of content and form. Rather, ge-
nius records the impossible bridging between these two conditions of meaning,
the unavoidable gap, in Kant’s terms, between conception and aesthetic judgment
that his sections on genius and nature are meant to resolve. That genius, or figure,
is everywhere in the specific examples of the rational and aesthetic idea in sec-
tion 49, that genius saturates Kant’s text as the object and subject of writing,
points to this bridging. That genius is also nowhere purely present in either the
rational or aesthetic idea, that genius is also the mutual antagonism between
content and form that prevents the truth of such a presence, points to the simul-
taneous impossibility of this act.

Let us historically characterize the aesthetic expression of genius generated, at
least in part, by the Critique and its formulation of the relation between the ratio-
nal and aesthetic idea. Consider how other solar expressions, attributes, or im-
ages of the rational idea of genius include the Critique itself, as well as the very
name Immanuel Kant, whose strange, complex inscriptions of light entwine the
Enlightenment and Romantic Anglo-European subject in a very precise way for
our own historically specific, disciplinary moment. If history is today’s clarity, its
illumination is not simply the certitude of a hermeneutic turn. If Romanticism
itself is the aesthetic expression of genius, if Romanticism as both cognitive subject and historical period is the aesthetic idea of the rational idea of the genius of figure, then genius also explains why the impossibility of the Romantic subject and period is not the same as the demystification of Romanticism and Romantic subjectivity, their dissolution into a larger, more accurate form of historic truth. The genius, or catachresis, of Romanticism is very much like the “necessary and simultaneously impossible logical construction” that Slavoj Žižek describes as Kant’s subject of apperception in the first Critique, the “void called subject.” We cannot get rid of this condition, since it exists before truth and falsehood, before epistemology and ontology. But, of course, such a prior state is itself simply a figure for the more exacting, ineluctable delineation of any one particular historical identity. We can no more rid ourselves of the impossibility of genius than we can rid either the long eighteenth or long nineteenth century of Romanticism. Romanticism’s name might no longer be used, but what Romanticism is is not simply relegated to Romanticism. As one valence of the long eighteenth century, Romanticism assures that the long eighteenth century never exists, neither simply nor absolutely. Not recognizing this predicament is surely a mystification, although that does not necessarily imply the option of simply recovering the demystified historicity of a larger era. Beyond Romanticism, beyond Kant, knowledge’s answer, its illumination, is still genius.