

PHD DISSERTATION THESES

**ENGLISH NECROMANTICISM**

(IDEOLOGY, HAUNTING, AND RHETORIC  
IN WORDSWORTH AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION)

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## Works Interpreted

Thomas Gray:

*Elegy in a Country-Churchyard*

William Wordsworth:

*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*

*The Prelude* (Book V, ll.1–48)

*Essays upon Epitaphs I–III.*

Karl Marx:

*The German Ideology*

*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Part I)*

Walter Benjamin:

*On the Concept of History*

## Theme

English romanticism is permeated by an insistent speculation on specters, ghosts, spirits, phantoms, and the like. The dissertation traces this feature in some of William Wordsworth's writings, embedding the problem in the Marxian issue of ideology and the Benjaminian notion of history.

What is really peculiar about the English romantics, is that one keeps encountering the possibility of viewing spectrality, not as a characteristic feature attributable to definite creatures or events, but as the elemental form of phenomenality in general. They keep reminding us that the specter is perhaps not something we could ever recognize or point to. It cannot be de-fined or de-limited, because it is not a thing with clear outlines and characteristics. Rather, it is the very appearance of things that can be called spectral. Specters would then no longer be instances of *paraphenomena*, which could be demarcated from the "normal" form of phenomenality (and which then could be located and identified as such), rather, as Jacques Derrida, the most vigilant investigator of the logic of haunting, has pointed out, "it is the phenomenal form of the world itself which is spectral".

Scenes of conjuration are often scenes of exorcism as well, since what they are aiming at is, in most cases, precisely the utter separation of good and bad spirits, of *Geists* and ghosts, spirits and ghosts. But the odic sublimity of the spirit keeps relapsing into the gothic world of the ghost, forcing Wordsworth to declare war on this gothic "counter-spirit"—the irreducible performativity of language, which intermingles the living with the dead. And as the analyses below will show, this pursuit is by no means peculiar to poetry or literature. In fact, it is at the heart of the most varied (post)romantic critical theories. Within the confines of the present investigation, of these, we can only discuss, in more or less detail, economics, the theory of ideology, language philosophy, and the philosophy of history.

So, by speaking of "English Necromanticism", the title articulates a connection that can hardly lay claim to a historic locality. The logic of *necromancy* (that is, the logic of the conjuration of the dead) is not to be taken as a historical characteristic, for it does not pertain to any delimited period or space of texts. Its workings could just as well be traced in texts other than those of the English romantics. It does not belong exclusively either to *romanticism*, or to *English* literature. Nor does it belong exclusively to "*literature*" at all. Even if one could come to such a conclusion from assertions of this or that author. Walter Benjamin, for instance, calls modernism, or more specifically, Baudelaire's postromantic poetry, "traumatophilic". And Philippe Ariès, in his gigantic historical work on the changing

customs of mourning and burial, describes the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an era of growing “necrophilia”. This twofold orientation, one that underlines the excessive aestheticism of both pre- and postromantic literature, no doubt, allows us to link the logic of necromancy to romanticism. Yet, such a linkage can in no way be exclusive.

What seems tenable is that romantic literature, and thus English romanticism, provides an eminently fertile soil for such investigations. This is how one may have legitimacy—if only for the time of a dissertation—to inscribe or conceive English romanticism within the logic of necromancy. If the ancient art of prediction (*techné mantiké*) was to guarantee the fortune of the living by the conjuration (*mantiké*) of the spirits of the dead (*necrós*), the retrospective gaze of the prophets being governed by a wish to foresee the future, then the speaker of the romantic elegy, who in the death of his fellow catches his own future demise (something utterly beyond the sensible world), produces a peculiar version of the figural practice of necromancy, as well as of the sublime “fury” (bordering on the “gothic”), which Plato discusses apropos of the foolish behavior of prophets (*Phaidros*, 244c). But necromancy does not only imply a passive moment of insight (or, at least, a superstitious belief in it), it also implies an active way of influencing the course of events, it implies the practical, historical power of superstitions, an uncontrollable spectral intervention, which shapes the future by interpreting the past. This may well be the elemental form of any arrival or any event, and the future would then always be the future *of* the past, and would always be coming *from* the past.

## Structure

The dissertation consists of five chapters, and these combine into three sections, which can be associated with the notions of *ideology*, *rhetoric*, and *history*, respectively.

The chapter that makes up the “introductory” part presents the logic of haunting as an intersection between contemporary ideological and rhetorical speculations. This chapter starts out from Jacques Derrida’s spectropoetic notion of ideology and goes on to Paul de Man’s reinterpretation of the figure of prosopopoeia, in an attempt to prepare the ground for the following readings of Wordsworth, which will, more or less openly, center on the workings of this very figure. The language of ideology, or of the commodity-fetish or money, is a “necrophilic language” (as Werner Hamacher puts it), which is organized by the figure of prosopopoeia (of personification, or more precisely, of speech-lending or “face-giving”). This seems fairly clear from the “funereal rhetoric” of Marx (or of one of his major English precursors, Adam Smith). So, the investigation of the workings of prosopopoeia in the elegiac or epitaphic trend of English romanticism can be considered as being an implicit speculation on ideology, economy or money. The primary function of the introductory essay is then to demonstrate that theories of ideology in their present state, rather than simply allowing us, even compel us to provide such an analysis.

The second part is made up of three chapters on Wordsworth, each “elaborating” on the rhetorical function of prosopopoeia. Through a joint reading of a poem by Gray and another one by Wordsworth, first, I try to indicate the epitaphic aspect of the wordsworthian notion of nature, how it implies a functional affinity between landscape and grave. The landscape seems to appear as a monument or a sepulcher, as the lodge, remain or epitaph of a departed and ever returning spirit. It is seen as a *locus* haunted by a *genius loci*, a recurring spirit, whose symmetrical opposite would be the poetic self, who keeps revisiting the area and is frequenting the spot in the very same way as the genius he conjures. Landscape poetry thus presupposes an epitaphic mode of speech and an epitaphic way of reading. After this demonstration, another analysis is focusing on a specific part of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*,

where the notion of the landscape as grave is confronted by a notion of the landscape as face, implying a confrontation between two modes of textuality, one incarnational, the other figurative. Finally, I examine Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*, as a work that treats the genre, which has proven to be paradigmatic not only for Wordsworth's own poetry but for textuality in general, in the most direct form possible. At the end of the analysis, relying on specific topological interconnections, I also attempt to provide a "definition" for epitaphs.

As a "conclusion", I turn to some texts of Walter Benjamin and make an attempt to rethink the concept of history from the perspective of the prosopopoetic and apostrophic aspect of English romantic poetry. Since this chapter centers on the inscriptionality and historical power of the necromantic gaze, it elaborates on the very idea that marked the end of the previous readings in Wordsworth. In so far as history is conceived as the inscriptional working of attention, it is defined as a process of reading, and is seen as an "endless prosopopeia" (Paul de Man), which can only bring to "life" creatures that are born dead (or buried alive).

## Related Publications

### AS AUTHOR

#### Review

- Christopher Norris: *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy*, in: *Helikon* 1994/1–2, 206–209.
- James Chandler: *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*, in: *Helikon* 2001/4, 575–578.
- Bettine Menke: *Prosopopeia: Stimme und Text bei Brentano, Hoffmann, Kleist und Kafka*, in: *Helikon* 2003/4, 468–471.

#### Paper

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### **AS TRANSLATOR**

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- Terry Eagleton: "Az irodalom szubjektuma", in: *Helikon* 1995/1–2, 54–61.
- Paul de Man: "Az önéletrajz mint arcrongálás", in: *Pompeji* 1997/2–3, 93–107.
- Jacques Derrida: "Mnémoszüné", társfordító: Németh Helga, in: *Pompeji* 1997/2–3, 148–180.
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### **AS EDITOR**

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