

ROMANTIC PROPHECY AND THE RESISTANCE TO HISTORICISM

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Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism

CHRISTOPHER M. BUNDOCK

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Introduction: Prophecy and the Temporality of Being Historical

For nearly seventy years I have observed, that before any war, or public calamity, England abounds in prophets, who confidently foretell many terrible things. They generally believe themselves, but are carried away by a vain imagination; and they are seldom undeceived, even by the failure of their predictions, but still believe they will be fulfilled some time or other.

John Wesley¹

At this momentous period, teeming with signs, wonders, and extraordinary events, and promising still greater, it would be sinful to withhold the least idea that might tend to enlighten the public mind; and as the world has seen an age of Reason and an age of Infidelity, so also shall the world see an age of Prophecy.

“A Convert”²

When William Blake, in the early 1790s, was writing his first so-called minor prophecies, biblical prophecy was enjoying a massive revival in England. Prophecy had been a popular phenomenon at different, turbulent moments throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – especially around, as Christopher Hill notes, the Reformation and the Restoration.³ And with the intensification of revolutionary violence in France, across the channel not only did this engender a reactionary politics but also a conservative prophetic discourse. To call such a discourse “conservative” may sound somewhat counterintuitive. Max Weber’s distinction between prophet and priest implies that the prophet is an anti- or at least a para-institutional agent.⁴ This certainly squares with the Romantic rehabilitation of prophecy as a form of, in contemporary parlance, speaking truth to power. And yet, Weber admits that “the transition from the prophet to the legislator is fluid, if one understands the latter to mean a personage who in any given case has been assigned the responsibility of codifying a

law systematically.”⁵ While a prophet may be socially and politically disruptive, he or she also advocates for a new system. Hence, when Blake’s artist-prophet, Los, announces “I must Create a System. or be enslav’d by another Mans,” much depends upon whether we place emphasis on the libratory *create* or the confining *system*.⁶ The prophet’s confidence in making new systems stems from a claim to special knowledge, very often knowledge of metaphysical truths and of the future. Indeed, it is *against* a sort of normalized chaos that the prophet erects an alternative scheme.⁷ From a historiographical perspective, this casts the predictive clairvoyant as an agent of synthesis, organization, order, and discipline. Likewise, epistemologically, the claim to know the future means that historical and political change is forced into available aesthetic and intellectual patterns, the “dull round[s]” that Blake will detest for being merely possible and probable.⁸ Taken together, this means that the prophet’s future may not be qualitatively different from the past. The result is a defensive, reactionary form of prophecy; Los and Urizen shade into one another.

Many Romantic, popular prophets demonstrate such defensiveness in their tendency to form analogies between biblical passages and their prevailing social conditions.⁹ What in the mid-eighteenth century had been – thanks to Robert Lowth’s 1753 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* and J.G. Herder’s 1782 *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie* – a growing interest in the aesthetics of Hebrew poetry gains new, political urgency when Richard Brothers proclaims “God’s awful warnings to a giddy, careless, sinful world.”¹⁰ Just as Brothers, in 1794–5, stresses biblical prophecy’s applicability to “the *present* time, the *present* war,”¹¹ so too does the anonymous author of “Analogy of sacred history and prophecy.”¹² With impressive exegetical dexterity, this pamphlet proposes to “apply this remarkable and most important passage of the prophet Isaiah [i.e., Isa. 8.6–9], which involves in it the efficient causes of the fate of a nation [...], to the present state of that church in Europe; and above all, [...] to our own country.”¹³ In *A concise view from history and prophecy*, Francis Dobbs, comparing the “*miraculous signs*” identified in several books of both the Old and New Testaments with his own historical moment, asks rhetorically, “Is not the papacy on the eve of its destruction? Is not infidelity prevailing with rapid strides? and are we not called on to watch and be prepared?”¹⁴ Another, similar tract, composed between 1792 and 1795, is even more specific, reading Micah’s “I will make Samaria as an heap of the field” (1.6) to mean that the “systems of Government shall be thrown into disorder and confusion, or in other words an intire [sic] revolution” – something that “has been evidently fulfilled in *France*.”¹⁵ Nor was this sort of speculation limited to fringe figures, as attested by Joseph Priestley’s 1794 *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies*. It is hardly surprising then that,

amid the veritable deluge of these and similar publications, James Franks, in his 1795 *Memoirs of Pretended Prophets*, should diagnose the 1790s as infected with “prophecy-mania.”¹⁶ Nor is it surprising that Thomas Paine, using more economic than psychological language, gestures to a whole trade sustained by “prophecy-mongers.”¹⁷

“The need to interpret the French Revolution,” notes W.H. Oliver, “stimulated a boom in prophetic publishing.”¹⁸ As a discourse for understanding revolutionary turmoil, biblical prophecy also informs – in different and implicit ways – historiographical projects taking shape through the eighteenth century, including Enlightened projects by Gibbon and Hume as well as the Rational historiography of Kant, Herder, and Hegel often grouped under the heading of the “philosophy of history.” The offspring of Enlightenment logos and the Romantic revalorization of mythos, the philosophy of history is both a reaction against and a continuation of the Enlightenment. Prophecy, as one form of representing historical experience that exists outside and parallel to the systematic, variously scientific elaborations of historiography by thinkers from Voltaire and Hume to F.H. Bradley, manages to persist in its synthesizing and totalizing work despite a growing suspicion toward supernatural explanations for mundane phenomena. It does this precisely by finding a new form of expression *as* historiography.¹⁹ But why, if it is so popular, does prophecy need to adopt such a disguise? One reason is that for every Richard Brothers, Emanuel Swedenborg, or Joanna Southcott, there was a small army of critics working to debunk and parody such figures. Hence, prophecy evolved and adopted a more ostensibly legitimate cultural form. When Romanticism is denominated the new “age of Prophecy,” this is to say that it is an age where the claims of prophecy are both advanced and opposed with new energy, producing a Frankenstein’s creature composed of elements of both the sacred and the secular. The appeal to biblical precedent, for example, parallels but also enters into competition with the Renaissance and Enlightenment topos of *historia magistra vitae* – the concept that history is life’s best teacher.²⁰ It is also complicated by a broader thinking of what constitutes a historical fact.²¹ Historiography’s Enlightened practitioners redefine concepts like evidence and method along apparently secular lines: no longer will testimony be taken on faith, or opinion pass simply as truth.²² Yet, they continue to organize data teleologically through concepts such as progress – what in itself “[i]n the later nineteenth century [...] became almost an article of faith”²³ – effectively sustaining a latent theodicy.

One reason for the revival of tensions concerning historical being stems from the failure to render a new, modern experience of time coherent. As evidenced by various reflections on history penned in the final decade of the eighteenth century and the inaugural decades of the nineteenth, there

is a pervasive sense of increasing speed, of a change in the pace of life itself. Such a change complicates and so brings before consciousness the experience of continuity through time typically managed by tradition. Consider, for instance, William Eden, the First Baron of Auckland's "Some remarks on the apparent circumstances of the war in the fourth week of October 1795."²⁴ Eden reflects on the conflict with France from a position that seems almost one of hindsight. In spite of a title that draws attention to the text's precisely located historical moment – one that, retrospectively, places Eden in the midst of rather than at the conclusion to the conflict with France – Eden, banking on England's "great naval superiority" and France's economic woes productive of "the high price of the necessities of life" and "general scarcity," believes that "the system of the French government (whatever may become its particular form) is no longer likely to be an obstacle to [peace] negotiation."²⁵ What is more interesting than Eden's particularly sanguine expectation, however, is the experience he describes that makes possible his treatment of the future as if it is already concluded – as if the conflict is substantially past. His discussion of the "principles, temper, effects, and probable consequences of the French insurrection" are in part, he says, "carried forwards by a spirit of investigation, and a desire to pursue an eventful period of history, *in which a few years have given the experience of whole centuries.*"²⁶ Historical life in the 1790s is, for Eden, peculiarly dense: it produces more experiences in a concentrated duration than one might have at other times. Or, put differently, experience is speeding up.²⁷

This raises a series of questions about how to understand this change phenomenologically. How "fast" can experience become? How much experience, typically measured out across a certain regular duration, could be packed into a decade, a year, a week – like, say, the fourth week of October 1795? And at what point does this intensification of historical time overflow the edges of the present such that one can see, with Blake,

a world in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.²⁸

Can one "live" the End in advance? This is a question to which we will turn later, especially with William Wordsworth and Mary Shelley. Wordsworth, for instance, experiments with prophecy as a means to forestall traumatic, apocalyptic events by anticipating and thus rendering experience – to play on Caruthian terms – unmissable. Shelley, too, imagines living the end of

humanity, though her aim – like Blake’s – is to compel a fundamental change in the subject and, by extension, reframe the meaning of the future. Indeed, as we turn, in the second half of this study, toward Percy and Mary Shelley, Blake, Schelling, and Kierkegaard, we encounter literary and philosophical prophecies that would aim neither to leapfrog experience nor to store it up. There is, rather, the powerful sense that experience may never synchronize with history – a sense that dominates not only consciousness in the 1790s but also our contemporary historical moment. It is easy, for instance, to feel that one might not be “keeping pace” in any number of ways. “It is this traumatic dissonance,” argues Rebecca Comay in a parallel context, “that determines our fundamental sociability: because the present is never caught up to itself, we encounter history virtually, vicariously, voyeuristically – forever latecomers and precursors to our experiences, outsiders to our most intimate affairs.”²⁹ But, crucially, it is this very discontinuity that prophecy insinuates into history that becomes, for the writers in the second part of this book, a resource through which Romantic thought can complicate the ideology of progress. Popular prophecy in Romanticism reacts in order, ostensibly, to quell temporal dissonance or historical untimeliness – to resolve historical turmoil into, as Wordsworth puts it, “A loud prophetic blast of harmony.”³⁰ Yet, we will see how just as often and in spite of its apparent motives, prophecy works as an *amplifier* for temporal, phenomenological, and historical discord. Prophecy thus becomes a mechanism for radically anti-institutional thought but not because of its alignment with rousing Bardic performance – that is, not for the reason typically imagined. Rather, what this study proposes is that prophecy’s greatest potentiality stems from its negativity, fragility, and failure. The prophetic subject is powerful because of her or his capacity, through self-immolation, to clear spaces for new thought, especially genuinely different, unprethinkable futures. Prophecy is most important for Romantic revolutionaries not when it maps the future but when it disencumbers the future from the weight of the past and from attempts to entail the future to the past through prediction. As we will see, especially in the second half of the text, only once we attend to this darker side of prophecy can we come closest to its most powerful political, aesthetic, and subjective reformative potential.

In *The State of Society in France before the Revolution of 1789, and the Causes which Led to that Event*, Alexis de Tocqueville reflects similarly on this discontinuous and mobile relation between experience and time. Describing what Hegel might call unhappy consciousness, Tocqueville identifies a gap between European culture’s self-idealization and its reality. “In the ten or fifteen years preceding the French Revolution,” he notes, “the human mind was abandoned, throughout Europe, to strange, incoherent, and irregular

impulses, symptoms of a new and extraordinary disease, which would have singularly alarmed the world if the world had understood them.”³¹ In fact, he continues,

[a] conception of the greatness of man in general, and of the omnipotence of his reason and the boundless range of his intelligence, had penetrated and pervaded the spirit of the age; yet this lofty conception of mankind in general was commingled with a boundless contempt for the age in which men were living and the society to which they belonged. Never was so much humility united to so much pride – the pride of humanity was inflated to madness; the estimate each man formed of his age and country was singularly low.³²

The convulsion presaged by this cognitive dissonance, the French Revolution, not only failed to ameliorate the situation, it deepened the rift in historical experience. One effect of the Revolution was that history, as the narrative synthesis of events, lost its capacity for producing complete accounts since the world it ostensibly mirrored became, itself, irreparably fractured and incoherent. It is not simply that time speeds up or slows down but that subjects encounter several parallel yet discordant historical times, at the same time – an experience to which we will return via Friedrich Schelling in chapter 7.

We see the nature of this change best through contrast. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville describes pre-Revolution historical existence as a sort of timelessness:

Among aristocratic peoples, families remain for centuries in the same condition, and often in the same place. That, so to speak, makes all generations contemporaries. A man almost always knows his ancestors and respects them; he believes he already sees his grandsons, and loves them. He willingly assumes his duty toward both, and he often happens to sacrifice his personal enjoyments for these beings who are no more or who do not yet exist.³³

This is *not* to be confused with the dislocating “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” however, precisely because “Among the aristocratic nations of the Middle Ages generations succeeded each other in vain; each family was like an immortal and perpetually immobile man; ideas varied scarcely more than conditions.”³⁴ It is, as Claude Lefort notes, the “contrast with this model [that] brings out the singularity of democracy” and, I would add, of history.³⁵ In the wake of the Revolution, “the thread of time is broken at every moment” and the experience of contemporaneity inverts itself from one of historical unity to one of forgetting and loss.³⁶ For Tocqueville, the “immobile man” is suddenly

surrounded by people from different historical periods, almost like a scene from Shelley's *Triumph of Life*:

Although what is termed in France the Ancien Regime is still very near to us, since we live in daily intercourse with men born under its laws, *that period seems already lost in the night of time*. The radical revolution which separates us from it has *produced the effect of ages*: it has obliterated all that it has not destroyed. Few people therefore can now give an accurate answer to a simple question – How were the rural districts of France administered before 1789?³⁷

J.G. Herder, to whom we will turn in greater detail in the next chapter, articulates a similar point in his philosophy of history when he notes that, in spite of a certain kind of linear development and unfolding through history, the past remains uncannily present, though alien; even if “The oldest times of *human childhood* are past” still “there are *remains* and *monuments* enough” to unsettle the unity of the contemporary.³⁸ Indeed, given Herder's tendency to categorize history's phases through bio-cultural maps (the ancient Orient is humanity's “childhood,” classical Greece its “adolescence,” etc.), different times, different “generations,” remain awkwardly contemporaneous with each other. It is a central argument of the present study that historiography and prophecy alike, as narrative exigencies, emerge with special force precisely as responses to this kind of historical multiplicity. The break from pre-modern notions of time produces a kind of historiographical mirror stage, revealing a crisis – a cut – in what had until that moment of reflection seemed whole. Thus, part of what identifies Romanticism as an “age of prophecy” is the confluence of different ages: Romanticism is the age *of* ages. And yet, this folding back of the age on itself does not mean that history resolves itself dialectically. Rather, “age of ages” means that it may be impossible to find a single historical container, a single medium into which different histories and forms of historiography could be translated. The following chapters suggest that it is this crisis at the level of historical form that shifts the Romantic imagination away from empirical history and toward a conflicted experience of time that eludes representation and is systematically repressed by empirical histories that bypass the existential question of their very possibility.

Like Tocqueville, Thomas Paine draws attention to this temporalization by addressing prophecy at length in *The Age of Reason*, suggesting, in the midst of his rejection of supernatural powers, that two different ages are in a curious and uncanny way the same. While Paine insists that a “prophet is a character useless and unnecessary,” his assertion implies a certain degree of general prevalence.³⁹ In fact, he argues that prophecy as it is construed in the late

eighteenth century “is a creature of modern invention” when, in the form of prediction, it “took charge of the future and rounded the tenses of fate.”⁴⁰ In its original application, argues Paine, “the word prophet, to which latter times have affixed a new idea, was the Bible word for poet, and the word prophesying meant the art of making poetry. It also meant the art of playing poetry to a tune upon any instrument of music.”⁴¹ In other words, only in his contemporary era was “The supposed prophet [...] the supposed historian of times to come.”⁴² If Paine rejects the efficacy of prophecy’s history of the future, he nevertheless confirms, in this rejection, the temporal overdetermination, the multiple ages of the world contained within the deceptively monistic, singular age of “reason.”

Reinhart Koselleck uses the term “*Zeitschichten*” to describe this kind of temporal layering as a new distribution of temporal and historical experience in the eighteenth century.⁴³ Koselleck’s research suggests, in fact, that a particularly acute awareness of, and ambivalence concerning, history emerges alongside an understanding of historical time localizable in the late eighteenth century. “The decade from 1789 to 1799 was,” he claims, “experienced by the participants as the start of a future that had never yet existed.”⁴⁴ Or as E.P. Thompson puts it, “It is as if the English nation entered a crucible in the 1790s and emerged after the Wars in a different form.”⁴⁵ This signals a break in what for Classical and Enlightenment historians alike was an “additive model” of historical thought; such a model, corresponding to “a uniform and static experience of time,” made possible the dominance of the above-noted *historia magistra vitae* – the notion that knowledge of the past could educate subjects on how to face the future.⁴⁶ It follows from the structure of this “prehistorical” world that “Precisely because nothing fundamentally new would arise, it was [therefore] quite possible to draw conclusions from the past for the future.”⁴⁷ Such a temporality recalls what Mikhail Bakhtin termed folkloric time which models a form of predictability that renders prophecy superfluous.⁴⁸ In Bakhtin’s description of this shape of historical existence, the regularity of seasons provides a rhythm wherein time and activity are seamlessly integrated, where each day might vary in detail but repeats a larger pattern implicitly reflective of cosmological harmony. Koselleck, however, identifies a qualitative change in historical consciousness precisely with the interruption of this kind of regularity, positing temporality and history in their modern senses as symptoms of a change in the subject’s experience of temporal (in)coherence. One signal of this change is that the concept of the future transforms. Rather than marking a state of affairs relatively continuous with present life, the future becomes radically unlike life as it is known, something completely unlike – to paraphrase Koselleck – the futures of the past.

In the midst of vast political and social revolutions across Europe in the 1780s and 90s, the future becomes “the bearer of growing expectations.”⁴⁹ These expectations, however, are no longer neatly assimilable to the prevailing social reality. “Events were constantly occurring,” notes E.P. Whipple in 1844, reflecting on the Romantic generation of poets and Wordsworth specifically, “to which no parallel could be found in European history.”⁵⁰ Indeed, “There had been no period in modern history, when those mighty external causes, generally supposed to stimulate the powers of the poet into intensest action, were in such uncontrollable operation as in the interval between the years 1790 and 1820.”⁵¹ If novelty, experienced within a world running on folkloric time, is understood merely as local variation within a basic orderliness, Koselleck, like Whipple, sees – in the wake of the American Revolution, in the midst of the French Revolution, and in anticipation of rebellion in Greece and Ireland – the emergence of an experience of novelty that would compel Western society to rearticulate its very sense of orderliness. In this transition, historical events are no longer just the content of a narrative that transcends and subsumes them but, rather, are capable of influencing the form of their very conceptualization. So if, as James Chandler remarks, the early nineteenth century is “the age of the spirit of the age – that is, the period when the normative status of the period becomes a central and self-conscious aspect of historical reflection” – this interest in establishing determinate historical categories reflects a new anxiety surrounding the very notion of being historical.⁵²

Romantic Prophecy

As Raymond Williams said, “Ideas that we call Romantic have to be understood in terms of the problems of experience with which they were advanced to deal.”⁵³ In the case of a “Romantic prophecy,” the problem of experience to which it responds is the growing anxiety about the stability of historical life and what it means to be historical. Prophecy is supposed to help deal with this new feeling of speed and dislocation in time by narratively organizing the sudden appearance of multiple and overlapping ages – a task it continues in the guise of historiography. Yet, as the following chapters demonstrate, historiography’s smoothing, organizing, predictive gestures cannot help but call attention to the same disturbances it aims to quell. The central paradox of Romantic prophecy is that with each cultural and literary expression, it revitalizes, elaborates, and exacerbates the very problem of historical experience it is supposed to correct. For this reason, the era of the rise of historicism is also the era of a crisis in historicity, a phase where historicity threatens to disclose a deeper, existential angst and is, therefore, repressed all the more violently. It is in this sense that

Romantic prophecy is both the origin of and resistance to historicism. This resistance is most obvious in those literary treatments – remarkably frequent – when prophecy performs what Blake calls self-annihilation or, more simply, moments where prophecy spectacularly fails to reproduce the kind of regulation that historicism attempts to proliferate under the name of science.

The key to reading this economy is the recognition that the *repression* of historical anxiety takes place through the very *proliferation* of positive, empirical histories. The logic here is articulated nicely by Lefort in his reflection on nineteenth-century historical consciousness as an effect of the French Revolution's revision – really, secularization – of concepts like immortality and eternity. Lefort argues that Chateaubriand, Marx, Balzac, Tocqueville and others register how “the notion of time itself has changed”: “once the fracture between *before* and *after* has become immediately tangible [...] humanity's whole past – the Orient as well as Greece, the Middle Ages and Renaissance – emerges, is summoned into the present, and simultaneously becomes a sign of a world that is vanishing.”⁵⁴ In Joan Copjec's gloss, “The great social revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century may have severed all ties with the past, but they did so, paradoxically, in order to establish a permanence in time, a durability of human deeds that was not possible previously.”⁵⁵ What marks this emphatically terrestrial sense of permanence is that it emerges “across a historical *break*; what was thus brought forth was ‘the idea of a conjunction between something that no longer exists and something that does not yet exist.’”⁵⁶ This is the abyss whence historiography springs.

This book is organized into two parts in terms of how different Romantic thinkers respond to historiography's efforts to construe – and, in essence, repress – a newly emergent sense of history. Part 1 (chapters 2 to 4) focuses on appeals to prophecy that attempt to shore up the historical subject. As we will see, Wordsworth and Kant adopt prophetic subject positions in order to, in different ways, assure themselves that subjectivity can master time and historical contingency. Yet, in the course of making their cases, each resorts to a different kind of willful blindness. For both writers, prophecy's healing and unifying promise proves to be unsatisfactory. However, given their deep investments in this discourse, neither can admit explicitly to this disappointment. Part 2 (chapters 5 to 8) concerns, by contrast, works that engage prophecy in an effort to exploit precisely its detotalizing energies, works that find in prophecy's negativity – including its predictive failure – something like Blake's “corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal.”⁵⁷ In these chapters, Romantic prophecy most clearly resists its ostensible continuity with historicism.

To give prophecy its due requires that we rethink the long tradition in which the Romantics are read as apocalyptic writers. In different ways, Northrop Frye

and M.H. Abrams singled out Romanticism as the discourse of imagination's turn away from history and into itself, in the effort to compensate – through spiritual abstraction – for the failures of political and social revolution. The obsession with the Kantian sublime as a concept through which to read Romanticism reflects a tendency to read the movement psychologically and as the product of escapist transcendentalism. As Steven Goldsmith argues, one might see this reflected in criticism that treats Romanticism as an occasion for making arguments about language or figuration in general. There is, he says, “a dominant strain of literary and cultural interpretation [that] has tended to reproduce the imperatives of formal apocalypse by minimizing the role of history in its investigations,” an approach that “enact[s] figuratively what the Book of Revelation imagines will occur literally,” namely “the displacement of history.”⁵⁸ So, despite its attention to historical context, one might accuse Ian Balfour's *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, among the most important books on Romantic prophecy, of a similar kind of abstraction since it continues a fundamentally de Manian form of rhetorical analysis.⁵⁹ Balfour is in many ways interested in prophecy as *the* discourse of figuration. Prophecy, for him, would be language reflexively “speaking itself,” a performance oscillating between language as a positing power – of naming – and as a system of meaningful substitutions. As the ground of figuration, prophecy would remain strangely formless. Hence, at root, every prophecy is a “prophecy that is not about anything” while, at the same time, “all writing that matters may be prophetic.”⁶⁰ Through an impressive range of philosophical and literary works, Balfour describes how prophecy becomes the field for understanding how language makes meaning. Hence, he details how prophecy and poetry bleed into one another in the late eighteenth century, creating an opportunity for the well-recognized prophetic strain in the voices of lyric Romanticism.

Where Balfour's stress falls on the *rhetoric* of Romantic prophecy, the present work stresses the *experience* of this phenomenon. This means reading prophecy – in popular, philosophical, and literary expressions – as a lived condition shaped in large part by a new sensitivity to time. It also means giving feeling and affect a much expanded role. Against the “anti-affective strain running from Wimsatt and Beardsley to de Man,” the phenomenological approach here attends states of being that struggle to find adequate representation in rational discourse.⁶¹ In Fredric Jameson's words, phenomenology “is precisely the attempt to tell not what a thought is, so much as what it feels like.”⁶² It is this methodological orientation that organizes the diverse collection of thinkers with whom this study dwells: Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard, but also Heidegger, Gadamer, Koselleck, Žižek, Deleuze, and, perhaps most important, Maurice Blanchot. As we will see in chapter 1, Blanchot speaks specifically

about prophecy as a discourse of failure, negation, and interruption – in other words, in precisely the counterintuitive terms that neatly elucidate prophecy's paradoxical (mal)functioning in Romanticism. But, more than this, his reading of literature always asks, "How can the unknown be experienced without being dissipated?"⁶³ "Experience," as detailed in chapter 5, is the broader plane on which phenomenology operates and includes states of mind, feelings, moods, and other sub-conceptual registers of human life. And yet, as Blanchot's organizing question indicates, the danger is always that experience will sublate – will absorb and domesticate – what is other. This would turn the chaos of embodied existence in the world into "experience": a subject's possession. The hypothesis of this project is that prophecy is the cultural and literary symptom of a historical anxiety that has yet to find clear, rational, conceptual expression. This feeling is not yet available to discursive reason. If prophecy is, on the one hand, warped by its rationalizing translation into historiography, on the other hand, it spurs the impulse to find new languages that better express this condition of existence. It is in this latter vein that Blanchot's delicate approach to what he calls "the outside" – something obscure and without relation to the subject – is anticipated, in specific instances, by Kant, Wordsworth, Percy and Mary Shelley, Blake, Kierkegaard, and Schelling. In these contexts, the future is that obscure, hazy unknown that thought threatens to dissipate or – to use a Shelleyan image – condense into precipitation: to turn into something probable, possible, understandable, tangible, and ultimately continuous with the past. From "forgetful memory" in *Hellas* to "self-annihilation" in *Milton* to "worklessness" in Kierkegaard's *Prefaces* and Schelling's *Ages of the World* to, finally, "dystopic utopia" in *The Last Man*, Blanchot's "negative phenomenology" provides a new theoretical and philosophical lens for reading Romantic prophecy.⁶⁴ This study proposes, then, to reflect on a broad range of embodied experiences, experiences that include but also exceed their rhetorical encoding. Just as Blake's prophetic art operates at the level of dense and complex "states" understood simultaneously as political, psychological, historical, poetic, subjective, and ontological conditions, *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* reflects on prophecy not only as a paradoxical form of speaking or writing, but also as a kind of mood, memory, and existential condition that – like Tocqueville's aforementioned "symptoms of a new and extraordinary disease" – is "Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart."⁶⁵

David Erdman's seminal *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* illustrates a different kind of limitation with existing Romantic scholarship on prophecy. Reading Blake's poetry consistently as "historical allegory," Erdman treats Blakean prophecy as a form of displaced but engaged history.⁶⁶ Although Blake is clearly responding to actual episodes in his social and political moment, he is doing

so in a way that is, however, far more impressionistic than Erdman's argument supposes – something indicated, ironically, by how often Erdman has to correct Blake's history. Thus, for all its remarkably wide-ranging and finely detailed scholarship on Blake's historical context, Erdman's methodology leads him to determine art *as* history in a manner that limits the hermeneutic potential of Blake's multifaceted work. Indeed, as Goldsmith observes, "The best recent work – by Jon Mee, Saree Makdisi, and others – has explicated Blake's enthusiasm by pointing it *backwards* in time."⁶⁷ This project, however, concerns how various Romantic prophets "orient that enthusiasm toward the future."⁶⁸ Rather than either limiting analysis to the philosophy of language or cultural history alone, the following chapters explore prophecy as a social and intellectual phenomenon that encrypts feelings about history that are largely indigestible. The study thus simultaneously heeds historicists' warnings of the tendency toward a Romantic (ahistorical) ideology while remaining critical of the polarizing tendency of some contemporary work that seems to think this means that empirical history and the statistical quantification of data ought to replace analysis of ideas, literature, or feeling. Taking a more balanced perspective, this project treats historiography *as* a Romantic idea, one born from the radical, existential feeling of being historical that initially vents itself as prophecy. For instance, chapter 1, "Secularization and the New Ends of History," demonstrates how the task of historical organization once handled by prophecy finds a more palatable – but basically analogous – medium of expression as the (ostensibly secular) philosophy of history, a science that refigures biblical eschatology as absolute historical consciousness. And yet, the prophecy of sacred history lives on in this "reoccupied"⁶⁹ form as the very drive to encompass the totality of cause-and-effect and so to explain historical events: a knowledge that aims ultimately to turn precedent into a template for living the future. Nevertheless, there is a way in which the incoherence that this historiography – as prophecy's proxy – is called on to ameliorate is never perfectly righted. In fact, in a line of argument potentiated by the materialist methodology of the biblical *höhere kritik* simultaneously emerging in the eighteenth century, prophecy's relationship to the future might also be thought of in terms of serial redaction.

Understanding prophecy as perpetual revision is of special importance for better understanding how and why prophecy in Romanticism can grow in cultural relevance in spite of so many failures to predict the future. For how can prophecy flourish if popular and literary prophecies so conspicuously fail to deliver insight? Given the urgency of historical being's existential crisis, how can prophecy afford to be so unreliable? We might sketch a response to this impasse through a brief consideration of a more modern study. In his classic analysis of cognitive dissonance, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Leon Festinger

and a team of researchers infiltrated the “Seekers,” a small group formed around Dorothy Martin (also known as Marian Keech). Martin predicted that on 21 December 1954, a massive flood would exterminate the entire human race save for her followers: these would be rescued by extraterrestrials. Placing the study within a longer history of prophetic disconfirmation, Festinger notes that the strange fallout from such “events” is paralleled in his case study: in his analysis of the Seekers he reports that, like the Sabbataians of the seventeenth century or the Millerites of the nineteenth century, “we observe the *increase* in proselyting following disconfirmation.”⁷⁰ Dr Richard Reece makes a similar observation in 1815, following the death of Joanna Southcott.⁷¹ In 1814 Reece discovered, much to his consternation, that Southcott’s physical symptoms were consistent with her fantastic claim to be pregnant, at the age of sixty-four, with the Messiah. Instead of delivering a child, however, Southcott died late in December of that year. Reece is surprised to find among Southcott’s followers a similar reaction to what Festinger observed with Martin’s: “After the events that have occurred, would it be believed that the blinded followers of this infatuated woman still cling to her opinions, and that their faith should not be in the least abated?”⁷² As we will see throughout this study, failed prophecies almost always prove weirdly productive. Rather than simply collapsing, prediction’s apparent cancellation sets off new waves of hermeneutic re-evaluation. Like Chronos feasting on his own progeny, we will observe that it is, in fact, not at all unusual for prophecy to live on into the future through the very displacement of the end(s) it promises.

Mediating History

The logic here resembles how the proliferation of artistic media in Romanticism complicates the fantasy of immediacy. For instance, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe how the drive for experiential and perceptual immediacy leads, ironically, to hypermediation: the production of multiple media, their layering and combination. What they call the “double logic of *remediation*” names this counterproductive relationship between the desire for immediacy and the actual proliferation of media that this same desire spurs.⁷³ With each new medium, past media are not simply dissolved; rather, “As Marshall McLuhan reminds us, old media do not disappear: they are subsumed archaeologically, coexist with, or compete against new and emerging media forms, becoming the very ‘content’ that new media represent.”⁷⁴ In this context, the term “medium” names a form of communication, a conduit, or a middle layer. But we should keep in mind that it also names “[a] person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate between the living and

the dead. Hence: a clairvoyant.”⁷⁵ Indeed, if “‘Remediation’ [...] seems to offer a valuable corrective to our tendency to think of media and technology as successive regimes,” it also hints at how the proliferation of prophetic “mediums,” in the historiographical domain, often obscures or fractures the linear narratives they are supposed to render clear and transparent.⁷⁶

Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane argue that, in spite of the image of Romanticism as anti-modern, we might better think of it as an era of multiplying media. In her reading of Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, for instance, Langan observes that in the “representation of song, and that song’s representation of image, text, music, the translation of one medium by another does not yield an equivalency – as in the ekphrastic model of *ut pictura poesis*. [...] [Rather,] [b]y using his own book to conjure the several arts – music, poetry, and architecture among them – Scott redefines print as a ‘general medium’ by contrasting it to the archaic ‘arts’ redefined as its content.”⁷⁷ Print thus becomes the new, dominant medium through which other media are projected. Even figures whom we might think of as “antagonistic to the dominant print culture,” such as William Blake, “identified with [print’s associated] values of democratic inclusiveness”; indeed, as Goldsmith argues, with Blake, print becomes a potent medium capable of registering significant, if minute, particularities such that the generalizing that print makes possible need not imply idiocy.⁷⁸ The growth in print publication spurs important changes in reading behaviour, namely, silent reading: a practice that, bypassing verbal articulation, seems to allow for immediate communication between text and mind.⁷⁹ Through remediation, communication verges on spiritual communion; modern, material print technologies become, in effect, extensions of the mystical medium’s paraphernalia.

This is explicitly so in Walter Scott’s lesser-known tale “My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror.”⁸⁰ The titular Aunt Margaret, “in a ghost-seeing humour” one evening, relates a tale to her nephew about her grandmother’s consultation with a mystic.⁸¹ The story goes that her grandmother, Lady Bothwell, one day accompanied her younger sister, Jemima, to the strange abode of Doctor Baptista Damiotti, “a dangerous [...] expounder of futurity.”⁸² Jemima, driven to anxious desperation about the fate of her careless, adventure-seeking husband, Sir Philip, who has abandoned her for military excitement on the Continent, finally resorts to the “charms and unlawful arts” of the so-called Paduan Doctor.⁸³ Chief among his apparatus is a magic mirror through which the seer “could tell the fate of those absent friends, and the action in which they were engaged at the moment.”⁸⁴ Damiotti is in possession of a televisual medium capable, it seems, of satisfying Jemima’s desire for immediate knowledge. Indeed, as a reflection on Romantic mediation, the text thematizes the same fantasy of *telepathos*, or feeling at a distance, to which print and silent reading is also a response. In her