

# Reading Novalis and the Schlegels



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Early German Romanticism entails a thinking of the construction and destruction of worlds. “Isn’t,” Friedrich Schlegel writes in his programmatic essay “On Incomprehensibility” (1800), “this entire infinite world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?” (KFSa 2:370).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will speak of “Romanticism” as a shorthand for *Frühromantik*, especially the thought of Novalis, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Friedrich Schlegel. I will do so for reasons of convenience but also because the emphasis on *universal construction*, as advanced by these thinkers, indexes what I take to be an essential Romantic dimension that resonates beyond their thought and into post-Kantian Idealism and Romanticism at large. Romanticism, from this perspective, inquires into the world as constructed, and into the process of construction, a process grasped by the Romantics as broadly *poietic*: the mind constructs reality in the post-Kantian sense of arranging it into a world through binary categories—but so does the artist or poet in her construction of fragments and worlds, and so does nature in its generation of endless forms. As Novalis frames it, “nature generates, spirit makes” (N 2:480): the two sides of the all-encompassing universe of construction, whose endless variety Romanticism seeks to trace. Implied in the above quotation from Schlegel is that Romanticism is also, no less centrally, a thinking of “incomprehensibility or chaos” as such: what Schlegel in his philosophical notebooks calls “the universal chaos” (KFSa 18:366). The idea of chaos marks at once the ante-original standpoint which precedes world-construction and from which infinite realities may proceed, and what appears from the perspective of construction as the endless material out of which the world or any world-fragment is poietically formed. This conjunction—of universal chaos and universal *poiesis*—underlies the most basic sense in which the

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entire universe appears in Romanticism as “romanticized” or “poetic” (so that Novalis can claim that “poetry is the genuinely absolutely-real” [N 2:420]), and in which the Romantic absolute is, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have called it, a “literary absolute.”<sup>2</sup>

The sense of reality as constructed and self-constructing, together with the irreducible “sense for chaos” (KFS 18:38)—for the singular, the disorderly, and the excessive; for the inhabitation of fissures and upendings; and for what breaks out of any given binary encoding, proliferating further constructions and further breaks—marks also the affinity that has been observed countless times between Romanticism and poststructuralism. Both arise out of a sense of the infinite fragmentariness of modern reality, and both have a keen interest in exploring the logics of this fragmentariness. Moreover—and this is the perspective from which I want to approach their transhistorical affinity—Romanticism and poststructuralism may be seen as grappling with *the same overarching process* at its different historical stages, and with two different moments of crisis of this process. The process in question is the ongoing formation of the modern post-1492 world of the global—this world that imposes itself upon the planetary depths and the rich plenitude of forms of life across the globe, and even eyes the infinite outer space. This process continues at the present moment of planetary crisis, as global capitalism not only seeks to re-mediate the global in new ways via algorithms, and to expand it into virtual reality, but pushes beyond the planetary into the universal expanse, dreaming of asteroid mining and life (and profit) on Mars.

As such, this chapter proposes that to read Romanticism “after 1968” *today*, or from the perspective stretching from the 1960s to the present, is to attend to Romanticism’s entanglement with *the global, the planetary, and the cosmic* as the interlocked dimensions or scales of the modern project of re-mediating the totality of post-Copernican (human and nonhuman) reality. “The global,” the way I employ this term, indexes the temporality of human history across the globe, or what may be called global humanity, whereas “the planetary” and “the cosmic” refer, respectively, to the deep time of the Earth’s planetary processes and the immeasurable time and space of the post-Copernican universe.<sup>3</sup> The sense of the immensity of the universe intensifies in the eighteenth century, and to think *across* scales becomes an increasingly pressing (yet increasingly challenging) task for thought—a tendency which culminates and, as it were, becomes self-reflective in Romanticism. Traditionally, this has been grasped as the Romantic quest for a new mythology of nature; in such a formulation, however, the contemporary resonance of this quest is obscured.<sup>4</sup> Romanticism is arguably the first modern critical cross-scalar thinking, and this chapter revisits it as such from a post-1968 perspective.

In line with recent scholarship, I treat “1968” as a moniker for a global crisis irreducible to the French context. In the long 1960s, anti-imperialist movements, utopian counter-cultures, and campaigns of emancipation marked a deep crisis of the global.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, it is not coincidental that French poststructuralism centrally targeted structuralist anthropology’s attempt to exhaustively re-mediate, and to make universal sense of, the global via binary systems. The poststructuralist opening onto the un-re-mediatable and the decentered, and onto the

destabilizing dimension underlying the binaries through which the world is constructed, appears retrospectively as co-imbricated with the conjoined rise, during the so-called Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene, of new more-than-human global and planetary logics: of networks and the digital, ecological thought and Earth System Science, projects of outer space exploration and the fascination with pictures of the Earth taken from space. A lot of these developments have proved inherently ambivalent, in which utopian visions often seem impossible to disentangle from their capitalist co-optation, from dystopia and catastrophe—and it is under the shadow of these developments, almost apocalyptically intensified, that we continue to live.

In light of the above, it is important to view Romanticism as emerging at a key post-Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary moment of global modernity's simultaneous crisis (also apocalyptic in intensity) and self-reflection. When Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy associate Romanticism with thinking in terms of crisis, and therefore with the first “genuinely *modern* position of the philosophical,” they may be taken to revisit the Romantic moment of crisis as the first critical reflection *on* modernity itself, and as resonating with their own time of crisis (LA 29).<sup>6</sup> The significance of such revisiting is underwritten by the fact that Romanticism serves as a highly ambivalent thought-laboratory for thinking *out of* the crisis of modernity, and at once for critiquing many aspects of the modern world and for justifying and advancing the modern Eurocentric construction of the global. In Romanticism, the ideal of the oneness of humanity and the universal promise of the French Revolution, merging with the Christian promise of reconciliation of all things with God, run up against the various alienations, divisions, and uneven developments and incommensurate cosmologies across the globe.<sup>7</sup> Romanticism seeks, in its own way, to assemble the unity of global humanity out of these divisions and incommensurabilities.

Moreover, the crisis out of which Romanticism emerges is not limited to a crisis of the global. It needs to be further placed in the context of the Anthropocene (whose beginning is often traced to the Romantic age), of eighteenth-century geological catastrophism and the discovery of deep time, and of the intensification of cosmic alienation amidst the growing sense of the contingency and infinity of the post-Copernican universe. Not only the global but the Earth and the universe are fragmented and chaotic, containing a multitude of processes and worlds—what Kant in his passage on “the starry heavens above” calls “worlds upon worlds and systems of systems.”<sup>8</sup> The Romantics attend to modern human and nonhuman logics of reality, exhibiting an unparalleled understanding of the importance of thinking jointly the global, the planetary, and the cosmic in new ways. Romanticism may be viewed as a singular synthetic attempt to grapple with *all* dimensions and scales of post-Copernican reality simultaneously, so as to collect them into a poetic system. This attempt is permeated with the modern anxiety over the finite inhabitation of an infinite cosmic void, and entangled with the modern hubris of wanting to re-mediate, from an idealized center, the entirety of reality so that it can be known and controlled. In view of how infinite and infinitely fragmented this reality is, can a universal knowledge, universal art, and universal history even be attained?

It is the Romantic project of the *impossible universal re-mediation and construction* that stands at the center of this chapter. In what follows, I outline this project with reference to Novalis's and the Schlegels' encyclopedic fragments, lectures, and other writings (both published and not—since I seek to showcase the problematic around which their thought kept revolving). While I cannot reconstruct here these thinkers' individual trajectories, I want to exhibit the scope of their shared universal project and its co-imbrication with the geocosmic logics of modernity, as well as to identify, within this project's very impossibility, the dimension of antagonism and crisis that resonates with post-1960s thought. When Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy emphasize the paradoxes of incompleteness at work in Romantic poetic construction; when Manfred Frank highlights the gaps of (self-)reflection or the figure of infinite approximation inherent in Romantic thought; when Alice Kuzniar reconfigures Novalis's writings through the figure of nonclosure; when Werner Hamacher connects the Romantic fragment with the suspension of the meta-position of absolute subjectivity; or when Paul de Man theorizes Schlegelian irony as disrupting any narrative-construction—all of these broadly poststructuralist appropriations of Romanticism (in their shared focus on paradoxes, interruptions, evasions, lacunae in absolute closure, and so forth) not only emerge out of the 1960s crisis of universal re-mediation,<sup>9</sup> they also highlight that within Romanticism which, as we will see, ungrounds the Eurocentric meta-position of universal history that the Romantics themselves seek to occupy.

## 1 “The Voice of the Universe”: Romantic Construction

Romantic construction seeks to simultaneously inhabit all polar opposites, scales, and epochs: the absolutely singular no less than the truly universal, the infinitesimal no less than the boundlessly large, and the present age no less than the longed-for absolute future or the deepest past not only of humanity but of the universe itself. This coincides, for the Romantics, with the task of their time, crucial for the ongoing self-understanding of global modernity—as it were, for modernity's own reflection upon the (infinitely negative) world it has created.

The contemporary epoch, as August Schlegel observes in his lectures from 1802/1803, is dominated by the “negative tendency” (KAV 542): the tendency towards disunity, analysis, and critique. But while the Romantics are antagonistic to this tendency, it is not simply something to be rejected. According to the principles of polarity and eccentric movement (both invoked by Schlegel), it is essential to glimpse “what is truly real” within this negativity, or what “cannot and will not perish” about it (KAV 540). As signaled by Kantian critique and the French Revolution, this age has a task, connected by Schlegel with the idea of global humanity, and with the problem of its assembling or re-mediating—of working out the logics of the global at the present stage of its construction. “Perhaps,” Schlegel ruminates, “[this] period should be regarded *as but one great reflection of the humankind upon itself*,” and such reflection must necessarily go through negativity (KAV 540; emphasis

added). In this passage, “the humankind” that is supposed to reflect upon itself is precisely global humanity, which, despite its apparent scatteredness and division, must grasp itself as one, in a fundamentally Eurocentric trajectory of development that goes from the ancient times to the modern global world as this world has been formed by the time of Schlegel’s lectures. This historical moment is where, for Schlegel, global humanity becomes conscious of itself *as* global, and the task of the present age (i.e., European modernity) has been to develop abstract thinking to such a degree as to make possible this kind of meta-viewpoint from which to affirm the essential oneness of humanity. The Romantics understand themselves as occupying the meta-standpoint of the self-reflection of the global, from which it is clear that “the *spirit (Genius)* of the humankind,” while still developing, is “but one” (KAV 537). And yet, while abstract Enlightenment reason could, for instance, postulate universal human rights, it could not truly grasp the oneness of humanity in all of its diversity or the oneness of human knowledge across different cosmologies and cultures. Due to its own abstractness, the contemporary age has fallen into a reductive empiricism in which “all human knowledge” (and all knowledge *of* the humankind) remains “an aggregate without subordination or interconnection” (KAV 540). Only a truly universal *poiesis* (and to be universal, one should be simultaneously a poet, physicist, philosopher, and historian) can exhibit (*darstellen*) oneness within this chaotic fragmentation. “Universality,” Schlegel insists, “is today the sole means for attaining again to something great” (KAV 541). At the same time, as he asserts, whoever has not “mastered” the present standpoint of critique, or does not inhabit the contemporary fully in its abstractness, “should not even begin to have a say” regarding the dawning, more positive epoch (KAV 540). The highest “negative” achievement of modernity—the universal meta-standpoint of reflection—should be preserved, even if its logic must be rethought.

Being contemporary is inextricably tied for the Romantics to being global in a new, post-Enlightenment way. One could say that, during this period, the Enlightenment imposition of abstract universality from above proves to be insufficiently mediational, or insufficiently attentive to the growing complexity of global contexts, and comes to be replaced by the Romantic interest in particularity,<sup>10</sup> serving to re-construct the global out of the particular and the local—out of local spirit(s), *mores*, deities, poetries, and cosmologies—towards a global synthesis emerging as though from below. Even the Romantic expansion of rationality to include the mythical and the poetic may be regarded as contributing to making the logic of such synthetic re-mediation more advanced and adaptive—so that, through this expansion, various forms of life and thought that are grasped as pre-rational or non-rational can also be co-opted into the global Western-centric history of consciousness. The empirical chaos of global humanity and of human knowledge is embraced by the Romantics not merely as something negative, but as the empirical *plenum* of a world whose movement towards unity is not complete. As Friedrich Schlegel puts it in his lectures from 1800/1801, the “proposition that *the world is incomplete* is extraordinarily important for everything.” “The empirical,” he continues, “is thereby provided with infinite play space (*Spielraum*)” (KFSA 12:42).

To set the empirical, the singular, or the particular free in this manner is to see it as self-constructing: to construct the particular out of its particularity, or to let it freely emerge in its specificity (*Eigentümlichkeit*), in its own free play. Thus, to study poetry is, among other things, to see how it “reflects the specificity of each and every people” (KAV 74), becoming the central element in the Romantic set of instruments for re-mediating the global. At the same time, since the global is constructed by the Romantics from the meta-standpoint of its oneness, the disunity of the world both fascinates them and appears as the obstacle. “The specific *problem* of history,” observes Friedrich Schlegel in an early essay on Condorcet, “is the unevenness of movements of progress in the various constitutive parts of humanity’s development (*Bildung*) as a whole, especially the great divergence in the degree of intellectual and moral development: the relapses and standstills of development” (KFSa 7:7). This context is important for understanding the Romantic logics of the fragmentary, too. In order to be able to re-mediate global reality, the Romantic must have a sense for universality conjoined with what Schlegel calls “the sense for fragments and projects” as forming “the integral part” of the transcendental view of history (KFSa 2:169)—i.e., as the history of global consciousness.

“The world,” as structurally incomplete, marks for the Romantics the site of endless fragmentation and not-yetness, and of endless configurations of relations, gaps, regressions, and delays. “It is an absolute relationality; nothing in the world *simply is*,” remarks Novalis (N 2:156). Or, in Schlegel’s more disparaging formulation: “*World* is the entanglement of inconsequential relationships... How peculiar it is that this meanness (*Gemeinheit*) occupies the place where the paradise used to be” (KFSa 16:335). Romanticism emerges out of an antagonism to the fragmentation and not-yet of the world, while seeking to inhabit them immanently so as to find a way *out* of them, to re-assemble oneness from scattered fragments—a task that is as constitutively endless as the world itself. The tendency towards infinite connectivity combined with one towards infinite individualization or singularization marks Romantic world-construction as characteristically modern. Perfect re-mediation would coincide with perfect relationality, a networked unity of singularities spanning the entire globe and developing historically. Can all the singular and contingent nodes of the global be reachable, or made part of universal construction? What about those peoples which “completely lack” poetry, and whose condition is “the regression into complete dullness (*Stupidität*),” as August Schlegel asserts of the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego and the Esquimaux (KAV 392)? Or those “wild peoples” of whom Novalis says that their narratives are absolutely unstructured (“without beginning, middle, or end”) and their enjoyment of these narratives “pathological” (N 2:322–3)? For Schlegel, the above-mentioned dullness may have to do with the very regions these peoples inhabit (which are, however, necessary for the polar construction of the Earth as planet). For Novalis, the principle of polarity likewise suggests that pathology and sickness are as indispensable as health for the re-mediation of the totality of reality. Thus, these peoples too form, in their very exclusion, a constitutive part of Romantic synthetic construction.

As may be glimpsed from Friedrich Schlegel’s emphasis on “relapses and standstills,” or from August Schlegel’s remark that “the phoenix” may best symbolize the

movement of history (KAV 537), Romantic construction is never just uniform or linear, even though the Romantics seek to encode it as such at the meta-level—as it were, when surveying the movement of construction retroactively from an absolute future, or from the perspective of what this movement will have been from the standpoint of completion. Inhabited immanently, the movement that Romanticism constructs is that of ceaseless (phoenix-like) creation and annihilation, and of the constant expansion of construction in all directions, all genres, all dimensions of being, a process that momentarily stabilizes only to be thwarted in its impulse towards stability, and to engage in a new cycle, new loop of decomposition and composition.

Crucially, this is for the Romantics a post-Copernican (or post-Keplerian) eccentric cosmic process: it is exactly what the universe does or how the universe constructs, in its endless fragments and worlds, some flourishing, some past their time, some yet to bloom, some appearing, like a *stella nova*, seemingly out of nowhere, and others, like the comet, traversing the skies as if without telos.<sup>11</sup> Through this contingency, these renewed beginnings and endings, these roundabout trajectories and spirals within spirals, the universe develops and grows. “Whatever does not reach its completion now,” Novalis asserts, “will reach it in a future attempt (*Versuch*), or through repeated attempts” (N 2:735). Universal construction is iterative and recursive: failed attempts feed into new beginnings. The universe tries over and over again, and at some point it succeeds—as in the solar system where it generates the human as a rational being, even though who knows what new alien life might appear in the future or how the human might cosmically develop. Perhaps humanity is but an experiment “*from which nothing will emerge,*” and whose end will be “half-tragic, half-comedic” (as Friedrich Schlegel speculates in his notebooks; KFSa 18:192); perhaps this world will be exhausted, and a new experimental attempt will emerge in its stead.

“All construction is indirect” or eccentric (N 2:398), and reality is so boundless that, no matter which part of it one considers, it is always but a “relative something” and therefore “is 0 in relation to an *absolute something,*” or is annihilated by the infinity of the whole, so that the universe appears from this perspective as a “universal system of annihilation” (N 2:526). As worlds emerge, so are they necessarily annihilated (in time) from the moment they are born. However, annihilation is at the same time an illusion (*Schein*), insofar as it coincides with new creation in an “over-abundant process of renewal,” in which the destruction of the old world is part of the emergence of something new (N 2:345). (From this standpoint, cosmic revolutions and events such as the French Revolution appear as constitutively co-imbricated.<sup>12</sup>) It is from this cosmic standpoint that the endless multiplicity of construction truly becomes visible—from the standpoint of the de-centered cosmic expanse in which everything hovers (*schwebt*, a cosmic operation too<sup>13</sup>). Such is for Novalis the essence of post-Copernican thought:

Philosophy *unbinds* everything and relativizes the universe. Just like the Copernican system, it abolishes all fixed points, and turns what rests (*das Ruhende*) into what hovers (*ein Schwebendes*). It teaches the relativity of all grounds and all properties—the infinite multiplicity and unity of each thing’s construction, etc. (N 2:616)

The Romantic construction of every individual thing is a cosmic construction: “everything,” from this perspective, “can be created or reached in a highly varied yet regulated manner” (N 2:616). The Romantic view of the global is a cosmic view, too, in which the global appears as a ceaseless relational process of creating fragments and worlds within the one humankind. In fact, there is only one “complete system”—“the system of the universe”—that provides full explanation of everything (N 2:620; cf. 2:346, 2:487).<sup>14</sup> The poet is but “the voice of the universe.” While the philosopher thinks the principle of construction ideally, poetry inhabits universal construction in a real way (N 2:848)—so that the writing of a poem or the creation of any work of art, too, should be understood as part of the universal construction of fragments and worlds, or as a poetic attempt that is cosmic in nature.<sup>15</sup>

Romantic construction, as Nancy observes vis-à-vis post-Kantian *Naturphilosophie*, is “a way of giving voice to all things or traversing all things through language (*parole*).”<sup>16</sup> The Romantic poet (as one with the Romantic philosopher, historian, and physicist) gives voice to the one infinite cosmic immanence. Within this immanence, “*all* is processed (*bearbeitet*)” in a construction that cuts across “all art and all science,” requiring of the poet-thinker “a versatility without parallel” (N 2:745; cf. “universality” in August Schlegel). Every particularity has its genesis and place in the processuality of the whole; and every particularity is itself a whole—an “individual” with its specific “characteristics” (*Merkmale*) and specific voice. “Poetry,” Novalis claims, “elevates every single thing through this thing’s specific mode of connection with the rest of the whole” (N 2:322). The task, then, is to ceaselessly construct characteristics (N 2:653): again, an infinite (cosmic) task—what Friedrich Schlegel describes relatedly as “the characterization of the universe” (KFSa 18:148).

The Romantic interest in binary categories, symbolic and language games, and mathematical equations, all forms a part of what Nancy terms *parole*. Novalis’s training as a geologist in particular morphs into his interest in the depths that are as earthly as they are cosmic, and in the symbolic re-mediation of these universal depths through differential and integral calculus as the mathematics of the post-Copernican universe (as developed by Leibniz and Newton)—a universe in which the infinitesimal is as boundless as the infinitely large, or in which any “relative something” is at once infinitely small and contains infinities within itself. Romantic thinking is a differential thinking, and Novalis’s emphasis on grasping the endless “elementary variation of the universe” (N 2:345) follows the achievements of modern infinitesimal calculus, which expanded the realm of *ratio* not unlike the Romantics seek to expand it to include not just fixed entities but what is infinitely processual. “Philosophical calculus of abstraction,” too, must be a differential calculus (N 2:668). In differential and integral calculus, Novalis finds a way of re-mediating simultaneously the unity and the vast multiplicity of each particularity, as well as the kind of double perspective that combines decomposition (differentiation) and composition or assembling (integration). As Novalis’s imperative goes, “the examination of the large and the examination of the small must always grow together,” so that the large must be “made more multiple” (differentiated) and the

small “made simpler” (integrated), all towards the “composite data of the universe as well as of its every most individual part” (N 2:444–5). As we recall, the dichotomy of annihilation and creation is an illusory dichotomy within the one poietic process of the universe—and calculus for Novalis makes it possible to rationally grasp precisely this kind of “fictional” construction. “The basic formula of the infinitesimal calculus,” he writes, “is  $(a/\infty) * \infty = a$ ; it is an illusory (*scheinbare*) approach,” in which even deviation from the seeming truth, even error (*Irrtum*), is a constitutive part of the universal method of re-mediation (N 2:449).

From this perspective, Romantic organicism or Novalis’s contention that the universe and its parts are living wholes appear less as having to do with an organism/mechanism dichotomy, or with some vague idea of life that cannot be mathematized (cf. LA 127), but as indexing the infinite processuality and differential mereology of the universe as the subject of universal calculus. “Calculus,” Novalis notes, “is the same thing as process,” adding: “Proficiency, certainty, and precision in philosophical calculus is what I must seek to achieve” (N 2:656). “In the end,” within this all-encompassing symbolic construction, “mathematics is but the generic, basic philosophy, and philosophy is the higher mathematics universally understood” (N 2:583). Poetry, too, is one with the differential and integral self-construction of the universe, inhabiting a nature that mathematizes “unceasingly” (N 2:444). The very possibility of re-mediating mathematically what is actually infinite, or of constructing a system of universal computability (a “complete counting system,” a universal calculus or “universal grammar”; N 2:568, KFSA 16:71), is a concern that would later be central to Georg Cantor, and that continues to resonate today following the rise of cybernetics, information theory, and the digital, all co-imbricated with the counterculture of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

To inhabit Romantically the cosmic landscape is to differentiate and integrate it, to construct and deconstruct it. Such inhabitation is made possible by the fact that, for the Romantics, human reason *is* cosmic, and the microcosm in us is the “absolute creative capability” that is literally universal (N 2:830). Ultimately, to perfectly construct even the smallest part of the universe requires one to construct the whole plus the entire history of the part and the whole. “Physics,” Novalis points out, “is generally the original history, history in the proper sense” (N 2:478), continuing in human global history and in human creative activity, so that the latter in turn poetically inhabits universal construction, thereby closing the encyclopedic circle that coincides with the Romantic system of times. The epochs of the humankind’s history, the epochs of the Earth’s history, and the epochs of the history of the universe must all be constructed from the meta-position the Romantic occupies. Romantic construction implies a total re-collection of the universe, necessitating progression and regression through geocosmic time.

In the end, every smallest particle must be perfectly constructed. Such is the meaning of Novalis’s claim, in his notes for the Romantic encyclopedia, that the arrival of the absolute future—the realized *hen kai pan*, in which all things will have been constructed poietically, and the mind and world will coincide without alienation—equals “the chaos of *the completed creation*” (N 2:514). “The future world is the *rational (vernünftige) chaos*” (N 2:514): in a way, a return to the primordial

chaos except as constructed. “The true method,” echoes Friedrich Schlegel in his notebooks, “would consist in the production of a *full chaos*” (KFSA 18:461). As universal construction draws closer to completion, as it goes through each “detail in the most complete and meticulous manner” (as Schlegel demands of historical and philosophical method; KFSA 7:9), the eccentric music of the celestial ellipsoids, the harmony of the alien universe, becomes increasingly more chaotic—in a poetical yet rational, rigorous, differential way. The descent into the infinitesimal leads back to the primordial chaos and forward to a perfectly constructed chaos, in which the infinite cosmic reality is decoded and re-collected. The principle of construction at this point ceases to be transcendent, God coincides with the All and the I with the not-I without remainder. In this way, Romantic “pantheism” emerges as the end result of universal construction. As Novalis writes: “The world is not yet finished. . . From One God must arise an All-God (*Allgott*). From one world [must arise] a universe (*Weltall*)” (N 2:551). The perfectly constructed rational chaos—the end-goal of world-construction—is the fulfilled creation, pantheism realized. In this state of the universe, no further work is possible. It is a state of utter fragmentation (“chaos”) that coincides with perfect unity (“*rational chaos*”), because every fragment in it is one with the mind that inhabits it, without any diremption or split, and the universe is fully “romanticized.” This absolute state is what Romantic construction impossibly inhabits.

## 2 Below the Split: Romantic Ambivalence

From a poststructuralist perspective, the future absolute state and the movement it generates from absolute beginning to absolute end is what must itself be deconstructed—and it is no wonder that poststructuralist readings of Romanticism sought to resist precisely the idea of inhabiting the self-reflective meta-standpoint of universality and the standpoint of completion or closure, since this standpoint is all-too-co-imbricated with the master-narrative of Western modernity. The point, however, is not to separate what is “good” about Romanticism from what is “bad” or to reductively identify Romanticism with the tendency towards subversion, openness, or singularity. The logics of Romantic construction are highly ambivalent, and it is important to attend non-reductively to these ambivalences, and to the co-imbrication between Romanticism, the Eurocentric construction of universal history, and the modern project of reason’s mastery of, and perfect control over, the infinite post-Copernican reality.

One way of thinking the point at which Romantic ambivalence originates is to focus on the temporal narrative which Romantic construction generates. What is the Romantic system of times, and where does it begin? In its broadest division into past, present, and future, it takes its beginning at what we saw August Schlegel identify as the moment of global modernity’s self-reflection. This moment indexes the opening of the very possibility of a meta-standpoint from which to survey universal construction as an all-encompassing universal history. Of course, for the

Romantics, universal history was always ongoing, from the earliest times. However, it only appears as such—appears *as* universal history—from the present meta-standpoint. This is the point at which, so to speak, universal history becomes self-aware, or conscious of itself *qua* universal.

This opening of self-reflection has the threefold structure of diremption or split. First there is the split within the present itself, because the present *is* the time of the split that makes the modern logic of self-reflection possible—most centrally, between the empirical chaos and the abstract idea of universality, or between nature and mind. Out of this split, the imperative of universal re-mediation may be said to arise. Second, there is the split of the present with the past as the time preceding universal history's self-reflection. Finally, since the present is caught in the contradiction between what is and what ought to be, this creates the split between the present as the time of incompleteness and the absolute future of "the completed creation." In the end, history can appear as truly universal or all-encompassing only from this future standpoint. In this manner, the diremption of the present and its reflection upon itself as *at once* dirempted and universal (a contradiction mediated from the perspective of the absolute future) generates the system of times.

Moreover, there is a further meta-split that emerges vis-à-vis this entire temporal system, and vis-à-vis the meta-standpoint that Romanticism inhabits. We may observe, again, that the linear master-narrative of completion—the line drawn at the meta-level from the primordial chaos to the rational chaos or completed creation—can only be drawn retrospectively out of the standpoint of the absolute future. Any moment—any present—*preceding* that absolute state is too full of eccentricities and deviations, of disruptions and standstills, of loops and variations, for such a line to be drawn. Between the present and the future, an abyss thus emerges within the Romantic system of times due to the differential character of Romantic construction, in which even if the absolute future is proclaimed to be imminent, the interval between the present and this future always remains infinite. This point is where all poststructuralist readings of Romanticism as a thinking of infinite approximation and nonclosure become possible. In contrast to any straightforwardly linear thinking of progress, Romantic thought seeks to inhabit simultaneously this differential abyss *and* the absolute future. However, thereby, the meta-split appears between the linear meta-narrative of universal history and what, at any particular moment, constitutes its underside, or the endless plethora of singularities that this movement seeks to re-mediate. This meta-split cuts across the entire system of times and makes it possible to inhabit the abyss of the singular, and to revel in the particular, *against* the overarching meta-narrative.

It is this meta-split and this abyss that poststructuralism—out of the 1960s moment of crisis at which a complete world-order or any grand narrative of universal history appears undesirable and impossible—may be taken to inhabit while abandoning the ideal of the coming epoch of oneness, nonalienation, and completion. But even without necessarily rejecting this ideal (which constitutes an essential dimension of Romanticism in its antagonism to the negativity of modernity<sup>18</sup>), this meta-split opens up endless ways of inhabiting universal construction against the meta-narrative of universal history. From Romanticism onwards, this tension or

ambiguity between the particular as re-mediatable and as un-re-mediatable or absolutely singular, or more generally between what makes the mediation of universal history possible and what refuses it, comes to dominate modern thought as a central problem. At this meta-point, splits begin to proliferate, so that within the Romantic system of times it is possible to inhabit not only the present moment but any epoch including the archaic past antagonistically against the present, or against this epoch's re-mediation into universal history—or to inhabit the absolute future antagonistically, too: to inhabit the pantheism-to-come or universal chaos, the absolute noise of the universe, against the meta-narrative. Whatever singularity and whatever moment of time become non-teleologically, antagonistically inhabitable as remaining *beneath* the meta-narrative and refusing it. The remainder of this chapter consists of three entangled variations on the theme of this kind of antagonistic inhabitation of what remains below the Romantic meta-standpoint.

### 3 Variation 1: The Meta and the Non

There is a thin line between “giving voice” to all things, and all fragments of the global, and assembling them in a colonial and racialized manner from the idealized Western center. Romanticism often crosses this line. The Romantic construction of the categories of “religion,” “poetry,” “humanity,” and others, and the Romantic interest in “wild peoples” and “the Orient,” or in any other formations of the global past or present, are entwined with the overarching modern construction of these categories as a kind of sorting machine for the West to make sense of and re-mediate its numerous others.

Following the decades of poststructuralist and post-colonial critiques, it is, most centrally, the Romantic logic of the meta that appears as the problem. Can one think at once the unity and the endless variety of the global without falling into a justification of the colonial and racialized violence of modernity, and of the modern Western program of self-assertion? While much of the contemporary work in theoretical humanities has grappled with this issue, I want to focus here on the thought of Sylvia Wynter, which has grown increasingly prominent in Black studies and beyond. The conjunction in Wynter's thought of the idea of an all-encompassing poietic construction of humanity with an irreducible pluralization of the global resonates transhistorically with the Romantic project. Yet, Wynter seeks to *invert* the logic of the meta, and to work out an alternative “ecumenical” logic of global humanity—a new “human project”<sup>19</sup> for the post-1960s—not from a Eurocentric position, but the non-position of the Black subject. In this way, Wynter may be said to restage the move of Romantic construction from the standpoint of the non, and not the meta.

At the center of the critical part of Wynter's project stands the question of who in global modernity counts as human. If, as Novalis notes, “man” is a “metaphor” (N 2:351), then Wynter's work interrogates the racialized hierarchies and shifts within this metaphor over the course of modernity following the collapse of sacred

geography and the opening of the globe for Western re-mediation and conquest. As a laboratory of such re-mediation, Romanticism provides plentiful occasions for being interrogated from this perspective, including Novalis's statement in his 1799 essay "Christianity, or Europe" that it is "one part of the [human] species," the European, that has awakened for a universal life and sets the course towards "a universal individuality, a new history, [and] a new humanity" (N 2:745). Wynter herself critiques Friedrich Schlegel's Indo-European-centered global construction of language, thereby positioning her project against the Romantic meta-standpoint.<sup>20</sup> For Wynter, if modernity is the age of the self-assertion of reason, then the normative subject of this self-assertion ("Man") is a subject that views itself as justified in subjugating and exploiting those viewed as less-than-human or non-human. "The West, over the last five hundred years," Wynter observes, "has brought the *whole* human species into its *hegemonic*... model of being human."<sup>21</sup> What emerges from Wynter's analysis is a developmental picture of the global as a racialized hierarchy of "humanness," with the Middle Passage as the foundational infrastructure of the post-1492 world, and with the enslaved Black African constituting the (non-)subject that remains below the construction of global humanity even as the emerging capitalist world-ecology is built upon its death that is as "symbolic" (UC 47) as it is real. (The infamous exclusion of Africa by Hegel from the movement of world-history is but a symptom of this broader process.) The hold of the slave ship becomes, in Wynter's account of modernity, at once the zero-point and "the origin" of post-1492 reality—a global reality in which "Man" is "overrepresented" over all other "genres of being human," and in which blackness is "cast as the total negation of human freedom," and of humanness as such: the constitutive non-position, non-life, non-being (UC 31, 62).

While Wynter's critique of the master-narrative of "Man" has become on its own a powerful tool across contemporary critical theory, the constructive part of her project is no less interesting in the post-'68 context. An insistence on the irreducible plurality of human "genres" is associated by her with the understanding of reality as mytho-poetically and narratively constructed, with "the sixties' movements" as challenging the global episteme of "Man," and with Jacques Derrida's critique of the Western bourgeois "referent-we" as (mis)identified with the "we" of humanity (UC 23–4). Wynter also draws on Maturana and Varela's notion of *autopoiesis*, as emerging in the wake of the Chilean May '68, and on the studies of the human brain emphasizing its "hybrid" nature: biological *and* narrational, an entanglement of *bios* and *mythoi* which co-constitute each other (UC 25–7). Following the emergence of this specifically human brain—the origin-event that takes place in Africa—each genre of the human narratively forms its own cosmology, encoded symbolically through the autopoietic activity of generating the "referent-we" that its subjects regard as self-evident. There is, in this regard, a perfect analogy (to use Wynter's own example) between the Pygmy and the Western bourgeois subject (UC 54–5)—notwithstanding, of course, the brutal overextension of the latter's "we" all over the globe.

Wynter's project is driven by the idea of the common: the common structure of humanness across its manifold genres, and the global and planetary as something to

be inhabited in common—so as to avert the “unparalleled catastrophe for our species” which is the looming climate catastrophe. To think humanity *at once* as fragmented and as bio-poietically one is the (highly Romantic) challenge put forward by Wynter’s thought. Not unlike August Schlegel at his time, Wynter sees the moment of crisis indexed by the 1960s as one of modernity’s self-questioning,<sup>22</sup> and of the emergence of a new consciousness of global humanity. Humanity must grasp itself as a single species, yet not in a biologically reductive way, but as “hybridly human” in a bio-poietic manner, and in all of humanity’s generic multiplicity—“for the first time in our human history *consciously now*” (UC 45). To achieve this would be to think “transcosmogonically” (UC 57).

Thus, Wynter does not simply discard the meta—indeed, her attitude to the post-1492 modernity is ambivalent, highlighting “both its dazzling triumphs and achievements and its negative underside” (OHW 123). One must not “go back to pre-Europe” but “go forward,” preserving the achievement of human “autonomy” from any “extra-human” dictate (OHW 164; cf. 141, 159). This was modernity’s own ideal, and yet it failed at the emancipation it promised. The tragic “aporia” of modernity is that its “emancipatory” logic turned “subjugating.” Can this aporia even be “resolved” (UC 64), and a true universality attained—“a universality... based on the recognition, for the first time, of our collective agency and authorship of our genres of being human” (OHW 163)? In this way, Wynter reiterates modernity’s move of emancipatory epochal “rupture” (OHW 159) *against* the modern logics of the global.

This new rupture can only be achieved via an insurrectionary “gaze from below” (UC 22), so that Wynter’s ecumenical vision entails a construction of humanity out of the zero-point of blackness as what remains beneath the modern meta-split. “The new utopian point of view” (OHW 163) can only emerge from a position that inhabits the nonclosures and fissures in the modern construction of the global. Such is for Wynter the position of the post-enslavement Black subject as exemplified by figures such as Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois (whose concept of “double consciousness” is central for Wynter). In modernity, blackness is a “utopia” in two senses: as the non-place, and as the place that “carries within it the possibility of an escape” (OHW 157)—a fugitive hybridity, inhabiting simultaneously the white “masks” and the black “skin” (Fanon), the master-narrative of “Man” and what remains outside and escapes it. If blackness indexes in modernity “the Ultimate Chaos” on which the world is imposed, then it is this universal chaos that constitutes the standpoint from which to grasp non-reductively the fragmentation of human-kinds.<sup>23</sup> Wynter’s ideal, too, is a chaos that is perfectly constructed, and that grasps itself *as* chaos; but this universal consciousness persists below, erupting from within the origin-site of modernity—the hold of the slave ship—as coinciding with Africa as the absolute origin-site of the (“hybrid” or narratival) human brain. Wynter seeks to reclaim and pluralize narrative against its monopolization by Western modernity. In her construction, the absolute past unites with absolute future, and the perfect unity of humanity with its perfect fragmentation. *Can the meta be assembled antagonistically out of the non—a future consciousness erupting from below?* Such is Wynter’s

post-1960s refraction of Romantic construction. Yet this refraction can be pushed even deeper—into the depths that exceed the global and the human alike.

#### 4 Variation 2: In the Depths (of Universal History)

Wynter's project stays within the horizon of generic humanity. When she quotes Fanon's dictum that "the black man's alienation is not an individual question" (UC 53), Wynter has the broadly humanist understanding of alienation in mind; yet alienation is not necessarily a humanist concept. In Afrofuturism, which also emerges in the wake of the 1960s movements,<sup>24</sup> and in particular in the theoretical writings of Kodwo Eshun and the associated Afrofuturist texts published under the heading of the University of Warwick's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU),<sup>25</sup> the enslaved Black African's alienation in the hold of the slave ship—modernity's original conjunction of alienation, displacement, and death—transforms, via science fiction, into an *alienness* that erupts against the modern world out of the dark planetary depths that coincide with the infinite depths of the universe. To rethink the non-position below the split as planetary and cosmic (the way Afrofuturism does) is to open the possibility of decoupling Romantic post-Copernican construction from the logics of self-assertion and universal history.

Afrofuturist thought also begins with the hold as the origin-point of the modern world. However, Afrofuturism seeks not to overcome but to inhabit the absolute bifurcation that proceeds from this origin-point—the rupture of modernity as the split between the post-1492 world of the global and the Black subject as alien to this world. In the mytho-poietic terms developed by the Black electronic music duo Drexciya (as analyzed by Eshun), this split emerges as "pregnant America-bound African slaves [are] thrown overboard by the thousands" while crossing the Atlantic. The slaves, while considered dead by the world, in truth survive, transmuting into an aquatic alien species and rediscovering the sunken continent of Atlantis.<sup>26</sup> The dead enslaved Africans become the first aliens of modernity and "the first moderns" in an antagonistic sense (FC 287–8). Like Wynter, Afrofuturism builds mytho-poietically on the concept of "double consciousness," yet insists on the split *from* the human species itself as envisioned by the universalist modern thinking of the human.

The Black Atlantic morphs in Afrofuturism into a Black Atlantis, existing in "the abyssal waters"<sup>27</sup> beneath the world of day. Black Atlantis is a counter-globality and counter-commons that persists below the global. To enter it is to submerge into the deep time of the Earth, which is one with the deep time of the universe. It is to enter the archaic cosmic depths—"as lethal as the Red Planet or the Rings of Saturn" (MB 84)—that are destined, in the end, to consume the world. The future is no less deep and archaic than the past. The slave ship turns in Afrofuturism into the alien mothership traversing, spatially and temporally, the geocosmic void. If at the heart of Afrofuturism stands the "drive towards the meta" (MB 132), then this meta-standpoint coincides with the depths that lie at once absolutely below and absolutely

above, in the absolute past and absolute future, decentering the ontology of universal history towards the dissolution of space and time. “Blackness refuses ontology” and, at the same time, “the future is black.”<sup>28</sup> Afrofuturism refuses to reconcile this absolute cosmic alienation; the goal instead is to inhabit it immanently: “to feel at home in alienation” (FC 296). “I have a nest,” Sun Ra announces, a nest “radiant like the sun,” “out in outer space on the tip of the worlds.”<sup>29</sup> The universal depths conceal an impossibly radiant bliss—or countless radiances and golden ages, countless “counter-futures” (FC 301) that overflow the future envisioned by “Man.”

From the depths and counter-futures, Black Atlanteans launch alien invasions against the world—not least through the sonic means of Black experimental music from Sun Ra to P-Funk to Detroit techno to Drexciya. In their practice of “time-dissidence” (CW 129), they generate “temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress” (FC 297). To inhabit fugitively these artificial disturbances is to “infiltrate the present” (FC 297) while evading capture, and while dwelling in a fluid utopia where the ante-original past and absolute future intermingle freely. This utopia manifests itself as “the flatline bliss of micro-pause abuse” (HC 15): a chaotic and collective counter-music to the harmony of a Hegelian world-history. In “afroatlantic rhythmic futurism,” “the art of noise” is “the art of war” and of “camouflage” (HC 15–16). If the basic orderly measure of modern clock-time, and of the divisions of modernity, is the second (CW 180), then in the futurist polyrhythm splits—and split seconds—proliferate. Black experimental music insists on and intensifies alienation, to the point of endless doublings and gaps. The task is not to reconcile double consciousness, but “to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations” (FC 298). Since the world is but an illusion—“can’t you feel [that] this world is not real?”<sup>30</sup>—to differentially construct the collective cosmic noise is for “the people of noize-zion [to] break the mirror” and to “escape,” via counter-*poiesis* and counter-rhythm, the bonds of universal history (CW 129). The deep antagonistic immanence that Afrofuturism inhabits is mathematized, too: a “wicked mathematics” which distorts “the master-codes of Man,”<sup>31</sup> and in which construction and disordering coincide.

Afrofuturism is concerned centrally with the violence of temporality, with the immanent inhabitation of what persists anachronistically below and against the master-narrative, and with the “reality-producing power” (FC 290) of science fiction and music. At the center of this kind of inhabitation of the post-Romantic meta-split is the broadly poststructuralist sense that all reality is constructed, including the reality of world-history, and as such can be interrupted, dis-arranged, re-mixed. “The drive to rewrite reality” (FC 291) can stand in the service of constructing the master-narrative or be directed *against* it. From a poststructuralist perspective, there can be no absolute subject of universal history, whether one imagines it as “God,” “absolute spirit,” or (in a sci-fi vein) an all-powerful AI that simulates the reality of the one continuous history. Universal history can only be constructed retroactively from the standpoint of the absolute future, and yet this standpoint (of self-reflective closure) can never coincide with itself, generating deviations, glitches, and lags that cannot be re-mediated. If the Bible is, for the Romantic Christian imagination, the

model of the book, and if Novalis says that the Bible is not completed but still grows (N 2:766), then this is because the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, names the prototypical self-reflective account of cosmic construction, which can only be completed at the all-divine moment of reflection-as-revelation that would close the universal circle. However, there always remains, as one CCRU text puts it, “a time-lag” between the meta-standpoint of absolute intelligence and what it seeks to re-mediate as the empirical chaos of data. “No sooner is it thinking than there is a rift in its mind,” thwarting the completion of all-encompassing re-mediation. Universal history “fails to catch up with itself, repeatedly, and as it drops behind it spawns more future”: the structure of “pure delay” (CW 121), of “infinite loop” (MB 177). The all-powerful God-AI splits from itself, and this split generates, beneath the network of universal re-mediation (“the net”), its dark underside: “the digital underworld of unlife,” “a sunken continent of infotech, a strobing black-mass of chronodisintegration” (CW 121–2), populated by swarms, viruses, and aberrant calculations that run counter to the master-code. This is the Black Atlantis, too, a utopian collectivity of non-life that remains fragmentary yet immediately interlinks without being mediated by universal history.

To inhabit the Black Atlantis is to occupy the position of “modernity’s fear” (BB 3)—the sheer cosmic contingency and chaos underlying universal history, and the frightful geocosmic depths that the Romantics are already fascinated by yet rarely dare explore directly. No transcendental structure of space and time, no orderly world, no self-othering can withstand these depths, which go deeper than mere “deconstructive” interruptions or glitches, even as these remain important instruments of a cosmic warfare emerging out of the chaos below. The depths call, instead, for the total dissolution of the world. Even “deconstruction has no place in the future; in the future there is only noise” (BB 3). “Raising Atlantis to the top means amplifying the low end until it becomes a liquid environment” (MB 152) in which the world is liquidated. The chaos before creation and the poetically or musically constructed chaos coincide (all language, art, and science, notes Friedrich Schlegel, will become music [KFSA 18:175]). What Afrofuturism demonstrates is the insufficiency of mere poststructuralist pluralization or interruption, and the necessity of a deeper antagonism to the world. *Against* the world, as a *no* to the world and to the desire for a world, the chaos that lies below must be ceaselessly uncovered and inhabited. It is from the standpoint of this cosmic chaos that any community and any one(ness) must immanently proceed—the standpoint of the universal void preceding the world of day, and engendering a virtual plurality of worlds while annihilating them in the same stroke and ungrounding any particular world’s pretensions at universality.

## 5 Variation 3: Cosmic Irony

To occupy the absolute standpoint of chaos as preceding the construction of the world, and as the endless material from which a world can be poetically constructed, is precisely the task of Romantic irony.<sup>32</sup> If, as we recall, the “true method” involves the construction of “a *full chaos*,” then this construction is necessarily ironic, at once absolutely serious and absolutely playful, at once reveling in contingency and rigorously constructing the system of the universe. “Irony,” Friedrich Schlegel writes in his 1800 *Ideas*, “is the clear consciousness... of an infinitely full chaos” (KFSA 2:263). If the ironist is capable of inverting and collapsing any binary through which the world is constructed, of revealing what is high to be low and what is last to be first, of interrupting and disrupting any narrative, and of confusing and clarifying at the same time, then that is because the ironist inhabits immanently the standpoint of the full chaos which simultaneously makes possible and undoes any world-construction. “Isn’t this entire infinite world”—we may quote again—“constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?” To maximally intensify this incomprehensibility is to pass through what appears to the common sense as the highest confusion, so as to reach, *in* this confusion, the beginning of the highest clarity (KFSA 2:367). This ideal is the ideal of chaos as rigorously, “properly constructed” through “logical disorganization” (KFSA 2:403).

What irony discloses is that this world, while claiming for itself stability and order, is (un)grounded in cosmic contingency and chaos. “Irony,” writes Schlegel in his notebooks, “is the *epideixis* of infinity, of universality, of the sense for the universe” (KFSA 18:128). It is as proceeding immanently from the standpoint of irony (or the clear consciousness of chaos) that the Romantic can construct or deconstruct any fragment and world; in doing so, again, she but follows the activity of the post-Copernican universe. Just as Romantic poetry is meant to inhabit the universe’s infinite self-construction, so Romantic irony, too, is not subjective play, but the deep irony and endless play of the universe, which annihilates any subject’s and any world’s pretension at absoluteness. Irony is what allows the Romantic to construct the way the world is *without justifying* this world as the only possible or best possible—even if the Romantics themselves often fall into such justification, or into a Eurocentric theodicy of universal history.

To view irony as cosmic in this way is to unground any assumption of mastery and any theodicy, and to inhabit immanently the sheer contingency of the alien universe whose infinity comes in modernity to reoccupy the infinity of God. The Copernican revolution fills modernity with a sense of cosmic alienation and anxiety—a sense that John Donne expresses already in the early seventeenth century (“the Sunne is lost, and th’ earth,” he writes, and “all coherence [is] gone”), and that permeates Romanticism at a time when the known universe grows even more boundless. In Jean Paul’s “Speech of the Dead Christ” (1796), Christ returns only to traverse the infinitely contingent post-Copernican void and discover that God is nowhere to be found. The “most important and highest” way to approach the universe, asserts Schlegel, is to view it “as fragments (*Bruchstücke*) left by a great

defunct poet.” “This poet,” he adds, “is God” (KFSA 18:156). These fragments must be re-mediated *in* their fragmentariness towards a pantheism of an infinitely full chaos. From the perspective of the absolute future thus understood, it is what is disorderly, and not what is orderly, that approximates the divine. “The comets,” Schlegel relatedly notes, “are perhaps what is divine” within the system of the universe “precisely due to their greater irregularity” (KFSA 18:167).

The infinite cosmic void morphs in Schlegel at times into a mystical intuition of the ultimate death of all worlds. If God is dead, then “only death is the path to God [and] the goal of nature” (KFSA 18:161). The “final [cosmic] birth” coincides with a universal death “in which all suns will turn into pure light.” “When all suns die, then is salvation complete” (KFSA 18:192). Cosmic evolution in its contingency means that humanity, too, cannot remain in its current form—no matter whether it will prove to be a failed experiment or a path to something higher. To the universe in a state of absolute rational chaos there cannot but correspond a constitutively different, alien form of what we call intelligence. Humanity is but a cosmic “process”; the “cinders” of humanity will be thrust into outer space whereas its “spirit” will “fly to the sun” (KFSA 18:163). Since the essence of all suns is chaos (KFSA 18:152), the spirit of humanity will thereby become truly cosmic, awaiting the apocalyptic death in which all will become light. Humanity seeks to dissolve, to become one with the infinite distance (*Ferne*) and the wandering stars—such is humanity’s “essence” (KFSA 18:161). “The vocation of the human is to destroy itself” (KFSA 18:174)—indeed, a highly ironic take on the Idealist theme of human vocation. Carl Schmitt could not have been more wrong when he claimed that “there is no ironic mysticism.”<sup>33</sup> In his embrace of pantheism and mysticism, Schlegel abandons the bounded self and gives humanity over to cosmic irony and alien contingency.

The mystical salvation or bliss that the Romantic craves, too, is cosmic and alien bliss. For Schlegel, it is the blessedness of becoming one with the chaos of universal depths, for which everything, including humanity, longs (KFSA 18:152, 18:178). In Novalis’s 1800 *Hymns to the Night*, too, the poetic speaker, standing atop the mountains at which the world of day borders on the infinite universe, “look[s] over into the new land, into Night’s dwelling,” longing for the dissolution of the world.<sup>34</sup> “The new land” beckons the poet as the new frontier, but the Romantic affect is to long for it rather than appropriate it. The Romantic looks beyond the striving for possession and mastery, associated by Novalis with this world in its “busyness” and “unrest.” At the beginning of the *Hymns*, the first movement of the poet is to turn away from the world, to leave it below: “Away I turn to the holy... Night. Down over there, far, lies the world—sunken in a deep vault—its place wasted and lonely” (HN 10–11). To look down on the Earth from the utopic non-place of the universe is to see how limited this planet really is, buried as it is in the cosmic expanse and destined to be consumed (*verschluckt*) by it.

The non-place of the cosmic void fills the human soul with an infinite longing (*Sehnsucht*) for a “heavenly freedom” (HN 20–21) from the burdens and exhaustions of the world—from the inhabitation of a dirempted world, and from the “unspeakable anxiety” (*Angst*) involved in such inhabitation (HN 16–17). But there is an ambivalence to this longing for the universe as “our home” (HN 20–21). This

home seems infinitely alien to human life as we know it. From the perspective of this finite life, the longing for the cosmic infinity appears, in Novalis too, as a “longing for death” (HN 38–39)—for the end of this world which, “full of longing and craving,” is meant to “be extinguished and die.” After the end of the world, “a new alien life” may flourish (HN 28–29). The standpoint of alienness coincides for Novalis with that of the realized pantheism or chaos. In “Astralis” (a poem composed for the second part, “Fulfillment,” of his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*), Novalis writes that, from this standpoint of absolute mixture (*Vermischung*) where “one [is] in all and all in one,” even the smallest thing emerges as “alien and full of wonder.” In this state of *hen kai pan*, “the future [is] in the past” and the orderly world is dissolved: “the order of space and time is no more” (N 1:366). At the same time, to look at humanity from the perspective of the *new* alien life is to see it as an alien life itself: at once as cosmically estranged and as an extra-terrestrial outgrowth of the Earth (to build on Friedrich Schlegel’s image; KFSa 18:152, 18:165). The Earth itself is but an immanently alien celestial body suspended in the cosmic expanse which forms the only “system” that we have, the only commons. The Romantic, too, seeks to feel at home in cosmic alienation. “Philosophy,” Novalis says in a famous fragment, is *Heimweh*—“the drive to be at home everywhere” (N 2:675): to be at home in the contingency and irony of the All.

## 6 Conclusion

From the Romantic perspective that I have sought to open up in this chapter, if there is a need for a new consciousness vis-à-vis the looming unparalleled catastrophe, then it cannot be the meta-consciousness of “Man.” Perhaps it can only be the planetary consciousness of the Earth (of the kind invoked by Friedrich Schlegel in his notebooks [KFSa 18:164–5]), the clear consciousness of cosmic chaos and the immanent inhabitation of the wicked mathematics of the universe, conjoined by the kind of construction of cosmic hieroglyphics and listening to the future<sup>35</sup>—to cosmic noise—that the Romantics call “divination” or “prophecy.” Thus understood, Romantic construction cannot but unground any Western human-centric construction of the planetary and the global. While modern universal history, and any theology of world-creation and world-governance, attempts to conceal the chaos upon which the world is imposed, Romantic irony uncovers and inhabits this chaos. Perhaps the line leading from the primordial chaos to the chaos of the completed creation, from golden age to new golden age, is not really a line at all—not a linear teleology or universal history—but the infinite vector of giving oneself over to cosmic contingency, and to an alien life that we already are.

To insist on alienness in the face of alienation, and to refuse to acquiesce to the world’s divisions and violences but instead to mobilize the infinite negativity of the universe *against* them, is to affirm what cannot be inscribed into the modern racialized logics of the human. It is also to persist at an absolute standpoint—the de-centered cosmic *no*—which cannot be re-mediated into or reconciled with the modern world of self-assertion, but which dissolves it absolutely. Against the world

of day with its “dismal work cult” (CW 124), the new golden age would equal the bliss of inhabiting the universal void as cosmic play. Humanity may be a cosmic process, and even part of the universe’s self-reflection or attempts at sentience, but its future is contingent; and if anything is certain, it is that the ostensibly universal history of “Man,” no matter its precise fate, is but a temporary appearance, a line drawn in the void.

“Nature,” Novalis writes in a fragment from 1798, “is the enemy of eternal possessions. It destroys all signs of property according to fixed laws... The Earth belongs to all generations—everyone has a claim to everything” (N 2:231). To revisit Romantic construction and the Romantic moment of crisis from the perspective of their transhistorical resonance with the global 1968, and with the current moment of planetary crisis and dreams of colonizing Mars could only mean to construct a planetary and cosmic commons that would de-center the master-codes of modernity and offer alternative ways of inhabiting the Earth and the skies. When Friedrich Schlegel in his notebooks praises comets as “upholding the community of the suns” or speaks of “Milky Ways” as “republics” (KFSa 18:152, 18:166–7; cf. KFSa 12:459, N 2:295, 2:479), at stake is more than crude analogy. Beyond or beneath its co-imbrication with Eurocentric modernity, Romanticism forms a part of the series of speculative attempts (which also include Russian Cosmism and Afrofuturism) at assembling the post-Copernican commons in which the global, the planetary, and the cosmic are inseparable. If philosophy has always been “a force that moves the world, that beneficently upholds it, or that forcefully unsettles it” (KFSa 7:233) not unlike the universal earthquake—then how does one inhabit this more-than-human power *against* the world? How does one inhabit the Earth and the skies against their appropriation by “modernity,” “capital,” “Man,” or any other forces that enclose and exploit? These questions continue to resonate from the geocosmic depths that underlie Romantic universal construction. Today’s intense crisis of self-reflection, out of which calls for a new planetary consciousness or species-consciousness have emerged (as in the writings of Sylvia Wynter, Dipesh Chakrabarty, or Bruno Latour), marks again the escalating impossibility of the modern project of universal re-mediation—of self-reflectively re-mediating and controlling the more-than-human scale of climate change and planetary instability, algorithmic computation and AI, not to mention the renewed widening of global divisions and gaps of development. Amidst the overwhelming negativity of the world, and the unbearable of thinking this negativity, the questions that arise out of Romantic construction in all its ambivalence appear today more burning than ever.

## Notes

1. References to Friedrich Schlegel are to the *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (KFSa). References to August Schlegel are to *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen. Bd.1: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I [1798–1803]*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), cited as KAV. References to Novalis are, unless otherwise noted, to *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, 3 vols., ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (Munich-Vienna: Carl Hanser, 1978), cited as N. Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). Hereafter LA.
3. On “global” vs. “planetary,” see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category,” *Critical Inquiry* 46.1 (2019): 1–31.
4. For an important traditional interpretation of the Romantic post-Copernican thinking of infinite nature, see Alexander Gode-von Aesch, *Natural Science in German Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).
5. Cf. Sarah Hamblin and Morgan Adamson, “Introduction. Legacies of ’68: Histories, Geographies, Epistemologies,” *Cultural Politics* 15.3 (2019): 264: “...what the long 1960s actually signify: nearly two decades of struggle that transformed the postwar global order.”
6. More generally, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s emphasis on Romantic *poiesis*, on chaos and fragment, and on “the *total* character of the [Romantic] enterprise” (LA 39), needs today to be approached from a different—less subject-centered and more planetary—angle, which is also important for understanding the deeper co-imbriation of their reading of Romanticism with the post-1960s context.
7. As Jared Hickman argues in *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Romantic philosophy of mythology in particular responds to the post-1492 “cosmic disorientation when the West and the non-West met” (78).
8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129 (AA 5:161–62).
9. See Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); Werner Hamacher, “Position Exposed: Friedrich Schlegel’s Poetological Transposition of Fichte’s Absolute Proposition,” in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 222–60; Alice Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 163–84. See further e.g. Clare Kennedy, *Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in Novalis and Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung: Die frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987); J. Hillis Miller, “Friedrich Schlegel: Catachreses for Chaos,” in *Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5–42; and Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
10. See Daniel Whistler, “Early German Romanticism and the Characteristics of Religion,” in *The Oxford History of Modern German Theology, Vol. 1: 1781-1848*, ed. Grant Kaplan and Kevin M. Vander Schel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023): 239–59, which makes this point vis-à-vis religion.
11. Comets, Novalis says, “are truly eccentric beings,” the embodiment of the cosmic metamorphosis (N 2:408).
12. Similarly, when Friedrich Schlegel analogizes between the French Revolution and the planetary instability of the Earth (KFSA 2:247), at play is ontological analogy within one universal process.
13. The cosmic context of *schweben* was already established at the time—thus, Kant and Herder both use this verb when speaking about celestial bodies.
14. On the same idea in Schelling, see Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, “Stuttgart Seminars,” in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F. W. J. Schelling*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 197.
15. Cf. KFSA 2:324 on “the sacred plays of art” as imitating the “infinite play” of the universe.
16. Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, *German Philosophy: A Dialogue*, trans. Richard Lambert (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 23.

17. On Cantor, post-Kantianism, and the continuing relevance of the problem of re-mediating infinity, see Sarah Pourciau, "On the Digital Ocean," *Critical Inquiry* 48.2 (2022): 245ff.
18. See on this Kirill Chepurin, "Romantic Bliss—or, Romanticism Is Not an Optimism," *European Romantic Review* 32.5–6 (2021): 519–34.
19. See Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006): 107–72. Hereafter OHW.
20. Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *boundary 2* 12.3 (1984): 45–46.
21. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 21. Hereafter UC.
22. See UC 24 (on the post-1960s): "All such humanly emancipatory struggles, all then so fiercely fought for! *You bring them together*, and the world system had begun to question itself!"
23. Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found": 37–38.
24. See Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 294–96. Hereafter FC.
25. CCRU was a collective laboratory of thought, and the figures associated with it (Sadie Plant, Kodwo Eshun, Nick Land, Mark Fisher and others) all developed different theoretical and political positions. Here, I only reference those passages from *CCRU Writings, 1997–2003* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017; hereafter CW) that overlap with Afrofuturist and Romantic problematics.
26. Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 83. Hereafter MB. Cf. CW 129.
27. "Hyper-C: Breaking the Net," in *Abstract Culture: Digital Hyperstition* (London: CCRU, 1999): 16. Hereafter HC.
28. Rohit Lekhi, "Black [Bedlam]," in *\*\*\*Collapse Afrofutures* (Coventry: CCRU, 1996): 3. Hereafter BB.
29. Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken (Herrsching: Waitawhile Books, 2005), 370.
30. Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation*, 383.
31. Katherine McKittrick and Alexander G. Weheliye, "808s & Heartbreak," *Propter Nos* 2 (2017): 33.
32. I build here in part on my reading of Schlegelian irony in Kirill Chepurin, "Suspending the World: Romantic Irony and Idealist System," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 53.2 (2020): 111–33.
33. Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (New York: Routledge, 2017), 56.
34. Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, trans. Dick Higgins (Kingston, NY, 1988), 18–19. Hereafter HN.
35. On listening to the future, see Ron Eglash, "Africa in the Origins of the Binary Code," in *Abstract Culture*, 35.