Introduction: Psychosis and/as Cultural Crisis

Elizabeth Fay, University of Massachusetts Boston

[elizabeth.fay@umb.edu](mailto:elizabeth.fay@umb.edu)

Abstract:

“Psychosis and/as Cultural Crisis” introduces and contextualizes the relation between certain kinds of individual and cultural psychotic expressions during the Regency and George III’s comportment as the “mad king,” behavior tinged with psychotic overtones. “Psychosis” and “psychotic” will be used in this volume primarily to refer to Jacques Lacan’s theoretical explanation of psychosis as a psychic disorder; these terms will also be extended to the cultural arena in a way that his lectures in *Seminar III* already hint at. For society during the Regency, challenges to legitimacy and authority caused by the king’s madness reappear traumatically as psychotic cultural expression, literary expression, and the spirit of the cultural moment. Underlying the arguments of this volume is our conviction that the Regency serves analogically to inform our understanding of American life during the Trump regime. In that the Regency is the most concentrated period of the Romantic age for psychotic expression, it is a fitting historical and cultural parallel for what was a prevailing sense of psychosis—that is, of a failed Symbolic in which words have little meaning—in life under Trump. To familiarize readers with Lacanian concepts relevant to discussions of psychotic cultural and aesthetic expression, the introduction also provides a summary explanation of Lacan’s theory of psychosis as a psychical disorder that he finds to be revelatory.

*Romantic Psychosis* begins with the premise that the Trump White House regime evinces certain similarities of culturally significant psychotic behavior and psychotic effects between our own historical moment and that of the Regency, with the years leading up to the Regency signaling what we might term prepsychotic destabilizations and the loss of a fully functional relation between the symbolic order and its subjects. The familiar phrase “the Madness of King George” may suggest more than a monarch’s loss of control over his symbolic function.[[1]](#endnote-1) It describes a psychotic break in the monarch’s identification with the illocutionary force of imperatives—the monarch as both the Father and the Law within the symbolic order—signaling something broader and generalizable to the affairs of (his) state. Our claim is that the Regency, as a period without a head of state, is a psychotic period: royal psychosis played out semiotically in the body politic. The similarities between Trump as head of state during his administration—a head whose affairs equally muddy distinctions between public and individual hallucination and demonstrate reduced and broken language use and paranoid fantasies, thus often leaving the country without a head—and “Mad George” are intensely relevant to the deep concerns held regarding Trump’s mental stability as president and his psychotic symptoms as played out on the cultural public stage. During his term as president, the United States experienced Trumpian behavior across the country, demonstrated by outrageous group resistance to the demands of reason, which illustrates that the body politic is threaded through with more than the king’s symbolic body. His mind is also intimately connected, and when he has lost it, the societal results plunge the nation into psychotic crisis, as the events of 2020 illustrated. W. J. T. Mitchell points out in “American Psychosis: Trumpism and the Nightmare of History” that Nietzsche’s aphorism rings universally true: “Insanity in individuals is somewhat rare. But in groups, parties, nations, and epochs, it is the rule.”[[2]](#endnote-2) What this ironic witticism doesn’t mention is that communal insanity requires a figurehead, a leader who speaks on behalf of the larger whole. In George III’s (and Trump’s) case, it is a leader who has lost himself and whose phallic loss registers a shattering or rejection of the Symbolic in favor of hallucinatory irruptions into the communal reality: an irrelevant throne, a failed governmental structure.

“Romantic psychosis” names this cultural expression of a lost leader during the Romantic period, in which psychosis revealed in celebrated eccentric behaviors is both embraced by society and critiqued by disquieted writers and poets. The Regent’s narcissism—revealed in his uncontrolled spending on obsessively decorating his person, his mistresses, Carlton House, and Brighton Palace—was mirrored societally, for example, by the dandy’s narcissistic and obsessive self-care rituals. By corollary, the obsessive, narcissistic presidential Twitter deluges that engulfed us daily were merely reflections of a larger cultural pathology. Because Trump’s hallucinative Tweets recall the Regency, with its xenophobia, ritualistic behaviors, and word disorders (such as young gentlemen deliberately learning the slang of cockneys and jockeys), I will offer an example of what I mean by a “psychotic” expression as a cultural malaise, rather than medically diagnosable illness, by beginning with George III’s malady during the five major periods of his mental disturbances. His eventually permanent mental illness provides a way to understand how we do and do not comprehend a president comfortable with disjointed, partial, or jumbled speech acts, uncontrolled verbal barrages sent by Twitterstorm, and messages often inspired by hallucinatory conspiracy theories. This is not to indicate that the following essays will treat such word disorders but to show that such incompetent syntax in a semiotic code, whether linguistic or cultural, and in a hallucinated reality is symptomatic of psychosis in a way that this volume explores.

George III’s disease was both physical and mental: diagnosed now as either porphyria or arsenic poisoning or both, it produces bodily and mental symptoms that caused both Parliament and the royal household to treat his increasingly arbitrary dictates and behaviors as “madness” and to restrain him accordingly. His sporadically unsound behaviors included “psychiatric symptoms such as confusion, fits and hallucinations,” by one account, and “ravings” by another.[[3]](#endnote-3) During these episodes, his behavior was policed in a way unthinkable today for any public official. Nevertheless, the confusion and ravings are symptoms that bear resemblance to some of the newspaper reportage on the forty-fifth president, while the king’s hallucinations—the hallmark of psychosis—are resonant with Trump’s paranoid fantasies. Until 1810, when the Regency was established due to the king’s permanent madness, his monarchical career produced another resemblance to that of any twenty-first century national leader in that the Seven Years’ War, as well as Britain’s involvement in the African slave trade and trade with India and the Far East, qualified George III to be the first monarch of a globally connected nation in the modern sense. In many ways George’s madness, as much as a chaotic Regency, reflects our own loss of sane leadership and the subsequent stresses put upon us that will undoubtedly leave scars on both the national and global levels. Beginning with the connection between the dislocations of the Regency’s various semiotic codes and cultural expression as echoing George III’s mental instability and his resulting loss of mental and behavioral coherence, this volume aims to illuminate how cultural expressions and individual writers of the British Romantic period, including the years leading up to and following the Regency, participated in and made use of Romantic psychosis.[[4]](#endnote-4)

I will remark on the present-past comparison a few more times here, although this is not our principal focus in the volume. Trump’s tweets and verbal habits during public speeches and televised appearances on Fox—which could all too easily be read as Freudian slips and usually are—often display a wild relation to truth and the signifier that, in these moments of floating, unstable, and incoherent relation between word and reality, announces foreclosure. These are psychotic moments and arguably make the connection to George III all the tighter, justifying our investigation. Whether the madness of King George or the skewing of language by Donald Trump, we are engaging in a problem of sovereignty. What defines the state in a state of language discomposure? What can a Regent or Vice President do in a regime where words are truly severed from political symbolization or, rather, free-floating in the unconscious of the times without the rules of signification to guide them? The libidinal wishes and terrors of the night overwhelm conscious intentionality, as registered in Congress’s frustrating attempts to engage the White House and Senate today or in William Pitt’s frustrated attempts to manage his king before the creation of the Regency. *Romantic Psychosis* situates itself amid the psychosis that shadows politically pathological neurosis, the instabilities of mind and governance, the polity and the (whimsical?) object of desire, and the specter of the postword that hung over the Regency and that haunts us again today.

Much has been said of the collapse of “truth” as a category in our own time. What registers even more perhaps is the loss of value suffered by words themselves: a collapse of language more generally and the resulting inefficacy of words to do their work. Words, and language, are the territory of the Symbolic. When the symbolic register ceases to organize our psychic and experiential lives, we have a state of psychosis. Voices can emanate from anywhere, telling—even ordering—us to do things, from Twitter, Facebook, text messaging, ads, and presidential speeches and adlibs. Looked at another way, these are hallucinatory voices, and their messages often—like those of clinical psychosis—don’t make sense within a rational order. In disorder, they make a kind of sense that barely registers as abnormal. “Truthiness,” Stephen Colbert’s ironically apt term for the Bush White House’s signature moves, becomes “post-truth” in John Oliver’s riff on presidential signatures; both notions disintegrated into “alternative facts” and “fake news” in Trump’s first years. But in the last two years of Trump’s term, there were often only words severed from any possible signifiers, free-floating signs roaming the metonymic chains of associations without needing difference between signifiers, their meaningful distinction, to qualify them for use. Tweet firestorms at 4 a.m., rants in the place of prepared speeches; these are the forms that psychotic speech inhabits when words no longer have validity or valence. Severed from the symbolic register, words can seem to mock their own indeterminacy, but it is nothing so clever. How punningly appropriate, then, that the title for Julie Carlson’s response to the three essays of *Romantic Psychosis*, “After Word,” addresses the problem of what happens after words are no longer signifying in meaningful ways. The pun strikes to the heart of the problem with which these essays grapple in different ways; like the posthuman, the postword may already be upon us. However, it has a longer political and literary history and was especially an aspect of Regency British life and legacy.

The question of a psychotic relation to words that appears to result from a set of neurotic symptoms in the White House can be argued two ways: either it is historically overdetermined (truthiness, post-truth, alternative facts, fake news, and now a version of Hamlet’s response to Polonius’s question of what “matter” he reads: “words, words, words,” which are “Slanders, sir” [*Hamlet*,II.ii.192, 196]—a very Trumpian sentiment and notably expressed when Hamlet is playing mad),[[5]](#endnote-5) or it is the state of a polity whose increasing fragmentation and neurotic fantasies are mirrored in the person of the president. *Romantic Psychosis* positions itself in relation to both options: history and mental instability are fundamentally entangled now in ways that were prefigured during the Romantic period when the sovereign nation echoed to some degree its king’s madness. We might say that the problem of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment was once the problem arising from George III’s bouts with insanity and his “removal from office” in parliament’s creation of the Regent position. As Joshua Zeitz writes of our most recent difficulty, theTwenty-Fifth Amendment’s “framers might have agreed that it could be invoked to remove a president who suffered mental illness that led him to lapse into a state of delusion or unreason. But not a president who already demonstrated those traits when the people, in their wisdom, elected him to office.” Mirroring indeed: is Trumpian America’s narcissistic and reality-denying ideal ego or its semblable?[[6]](#endnote-6) Was the Romantic imaginary irredeemably entangled with sovereign psychosis? The four or so decades comprising the Romantic are years in which the evental occurred so repeatedly that we might think of it in terms of explosions: cultural, political, technological, scientific, philosophical explosions that produced what we now recognize as the basis for our contemporary lives. We are tied to these explosive years in ways we may no longer recognize, but the historical similarity of a certain situatedness—the Regency, Trump’s America—when madness seems to have had a particular role in historical and cultural production is currently a strong, recognizable part of that roping together of the past and present.

What does it mean to live now in these mad times when paranoia is a daily marker of our sense of belonging to an internationality and a global community? Our daily uncertainty has a contemporaneity with that of the Regency’s sense of instability after the Peace of Amiens collapsed. Those post-1800 years produced an assertive negativity of a possible future that we associate with Romantic irony and that has resonance with today’s dark comedy spawned from White House antics. Both then and now dark despair fluctuated with the assertive optimism that we associate with P. B. Shelley’s idealism and that for us looks like the promise of a scientific rehabilitation of global pandemics, globate climate change, and the future to come. Both sides of this antinomy—irony and idealism—had fissures, cracks caused by uncertainty about a path forward that are analogous to the cracks in a psychotic state when the organizing labor of the Symbolic isn’t apparent. In psychosis, the Real intrudes into every crack or tear in the ego’s fabricated story of what is actually happening and of what should happen in the expected patterns of general systematicity. This volume posits the idea that today’s world also bears the marks of a psychotic fissure and that these destabilizations caused by an intrusive and traumatic Real parallel to a recognizable degree the psychotic expression intruding on so much of Romantic imaginative experience; in doing so, the volume investigates how literary texts express the disjuncture between the Symbolic and its foreclosure in a historically psychotic episode. Historical trauma coupled with a mad sovereign produces a sense that interpretability is up for grabs in a world without “facts” and where truth is how one defines it; how must literature deal with this paradox? The three essays that follow unpack singular texts—Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1793) and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), the bodily text of Beau Brummell’s dandyism, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s late-Romantic *Aurora Leigh* (1856)—in terms of the ways they give expression to, respond to, or voice the psychosis that is Romanticism in its least idealist, least ideological, and most fractured condition. Julie Carlson’s afterword mediates the essays through a larger consideration of neurocosmopolitanism and its bodily, biological, and linguistic functions of signification, agency, boundary permeability, and cultural sedimentations and disruptions.

In bringing together these essays, *Romantic Psychosis* offers ways to engage Lacan’s conception of psychosis in *Seminar III* with Romantic texts and lives and to engage feminist responses to Lacan’s theories, so as to push against some standard assumptions in Romantic studies concerning the male gaze, body/mind segregation, and past/present noncontinuity. The volume takes as its historical field the problem of Romantic psychology: the Romantic period was the seedbed of Freudian psychoanalysis with its attention to subjectivity, affect, the psyche, dream visions and nightmares, and the realization of an inhabited unconscious. Lacanian interpretations and innovations in Freudian theory have meant that a Lacanian lens reveals the sociopolitical field in ways not otherwise available. As Daniela Garofalo and David Sigler note, “Lacan matters for a politicized study of culture,” and if “the quintessentially Romantic project of subject-formation tends to get caught up, irredeemably, in its impasses,” this further reveals the lacks that inform subjective experience and cultural expression (xi, xviii). Even more situating is the problem of Romantic crisis, whether the trauma of revolution or that of war’s aftermath. Psychoanalytic theory provides the essays’ main lens as a generative conceptual structure for thinking through moments of cultural crisis during the Romantic period. In taking on the conspiracy of language and psychopathology at the level of cultural crisis, *Romantic Psychosis* seeks not only to participate in current debates about neurocosmopolitanism but also to use it as a bridge to larger-scale thinking about how the particularities of the past and of our peculiar present are knotted together and interlaced in ways that speak to the knots in psychic registers (Imaginary-Real-Symbolic) that Lacan theorizes.

More largely, the essays are grounded in the eventfulness of Romanticism. They are premised on the idea that what the Romantics developed has great currency for us today. Innovative approaches to recognize and engage with the female specular gaze, creative ways to grapple with materiality, and expressions of culturally inscribed psychosis resonate particularly with our own crises of political, environmental, and psychic undoings. Perhaps even more so does the unraveling of cultural institutions structured by heteronormativity cry out for a Romantically-informed intervention. In offering a wider perspective for the particular and shared concerns of the three essays, Carlson not only brings out the their congruencies while responding to the way each offers a different entry into thinking about “Romantic psychosis”; she also offers a way to think more deeply about what it means to leverage a term like “psychosis” to interrogate adjacencies between past and present critical times and between language and the law during psychotically destabilized periods of crisis.

The law becomes implicitly important for this volume’s essays precisely because the subject’s relation to the signifier is both to language generally and to the primordial signifier perpetually: that which names the prohibition against the desire for presence. The paternal metaphor, the Name-of-the-Father (which prohibits desire for the mother[[7]](#endnote-7)), is the basis of social authority. The law of the father plays a distinguishing role in each of the three subjects under scrutiny: Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Beau Brummell. All three bear names that cannot compete with the Name-of-the-Father, though each tries to subvert the Name’s power to subject them and constrain or deny their desire, their capacity to situate their bodies as sites of expressive satisfaction. Todd McGowan points out that the psychotic subject’s disenfranchisement from the signifier is not liberation from the law’s constraint. By evading the law’s regulation, the psychotic might appear to have found a way to enter into his own pleasure at will, since language has no regulatory effect on him and sentences don’t even need to end or maintain a “sense.” Or rather, the “sense” of words becomes sensory rather than syntactically logical. Moreover, the subject’s access to the Real is unmediated by the Symbolic and therefore appears during psychotic episodes or during the artistic attempt to portray that experience at the personal, rather than historical or cultural, level. But as McGowan notes, such freedom is a “freedom from subjectivity rather than the freedom of the subject” (49). Moreover, “The schizophrenic’s foreclosure of the signifier of law does not eliminate the effect of law on the signifying structure” (49)—a problem that Brummell in particular discovered quite starkly, although it is unclear that in his later years he realized the full extent of his disconnection from the law.

Law is the irrational prohibition against one’s own desire and thus subtends society’s demand for conformity and for subjects to desire recognition from those in power in order to achieve their own power of recognition. Jane Austen’s Mr. Collins exemplifies the desire for compliance with social demand. But one’s freedom lies in the distance between the unreason of the law and the seeming logic of social demand. Put another way, the law dominates our unconscious desire, and if demand is how we give expression to desire’s unremitting tug, the law also provides the room for artistic play (Elizabeth Bennet’s pithy wit rather than Mr. Collins’s empty verbal arabesques). The field of the Other—the “domain of law and language, law-as-language,” as Elizabeth Grosz explains—is paramount if the infantile ego is to mature into a speaking subject (66). If demand “initiates the child into the categories and terms of discourse,” it does not provide the libidinal push that desire does: desire “institutes a new relation to and in language,” one directly linked to both the formation of the discursive subject (the ‘I’) and to “systems of meaning unregulated by any individual or group, and unrestricted in relation to and in language” (Grosz 66).[[8]](#endnote-8) And yet, desire is also what is repressed, what constitutes the unconscious and what also provides the foundation for the unique character of each speaking subject: “The function of desire is a last residuum of the effect of the signifier in the subject,” according to Lacan, and so powerful is this effect that “*Desidero* is the Freudian *cogito*” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 154).

The neurotic subject finds his or her freedom in the distance between unconscious and conscious motivations. But the psychotic has lost this distance and hallucinates an entirely different relation to authority and power. It is one that bypasses society altogether during psychotic and creative periods, paying only lip service to them during the periods between episodes. His or her relation to the Name-of-the-Father is like that of an inexplicably absent father—there is no quilting point to the domain of signifiers that provides the normative subject with an awareness of what signifiers are supposed to do. The psychotic’s relation to verbiage is unhinged. Yet the Name-of-the-Father, like a real father, does not simply disappear; laws remain in place, subjects are constrained, power maintains itself. For the psychotic, the primordial signifier (the phallus) or Father’s Name reinstates itself in the Real, so that the subject hallucinates or “hears” voices; as Judge Schreber’s memoirs testify, the psychotic may well hear the Father’s voice as a divine or supernatural one that calls him directly, offering revelation and commanding his or her desire. Psychotic delusion makes the unconscious literal, thus further separating one from the normative “reality” of subjects fully integrated into the Symbolic and its law. In this way, psychosis plays out the redoubling of negation that resistant subjects experience under the Law of the Father and the juridical. Again, Wollstonecraft, Barrett Browning, and Brummell offer different but compelling versions of a nonredemptive negation at work, for although we are arguing that psychosis can also be culturally and historically symptomatic, it is never culturally or historically productive or eventful. Its power lies in what it says about us, rather than what it achieves. Psychosis is always pathological in the sense that its symptoms reveal a distortion or disruption in the functioning of the Symbolic at either the individual or societal level (although Lacan also makes clear that psychosis, or at least the psychotic mechanism, is also normative at a certain stage of development[[9]](#endnote-9)). In terms of historical and cultural similarities between the United States under Trump and Regency Britain, we could say that psychosis became normative in both periods, displacing neurosis (particularly hysterical and obsessional neuroses) as the normative pathology under patriarchal capitalism. Because of this norming of its symptoms, it is important to attend to psychotic expression, which is always in need of interrogation. During the years of Trump, such interrogation had become imperative in order to redirect cultural behaviors toward a more healthful relation to the Symbolic. The three Romantic artists under scrutiny in this volume offer the occasion for reconsidering other instances of Romantic psychosis that have not been identified as such or that have been interpreted otherwise and even ignored. In this sense, *Romantic Psychosis* is an open call for more work to be done on texts and historical moments in the period that evinces psychosis at either the personal or sociocultural level or both.

**Psychosis, Tout Court**

What follows here is a sketch of Lacan’s theoretical understanding of psychosisas a significant aspect of the human condition in language, and his presentation of psychosis as something that extends beyond the clinical treatment of the disease into a fundamental disruption in the human capacity to organize life and mentality symbolically. Freud considered neurosis to be the pervasive psychiatric adaption to the conditions of living under patriarchy in a class-structured, Western society.[[10]](#endnote-10) We have come to understand this (mal)adaptation as peculiarly situated in nineteenth-century Western societies, and the Freudian trilogy of neurosis, perversion, and psychosis as characterizing the nineteenth century in Europe writ large. Building on Freudian theory, Lacan’s seminars gradually evolve a model more suited to characterizing twentieth-century Western culture, particularly that of the Euro-American world. As his medical training was conducted during World War II, Lacan’s theories respond to the psychiatry of those years, predicated on the advancements achieved since Freud. The trauma of the war years of WWII gave Lacan insight into how the psyche responds to stresses that are due to culturally situated shock, in which so much socially informed experience lies beyond verbal expression except in the most self-alienated way or most figurative way.

The relevance of Lacan’s explication of psychosis is that it shows how we might consider it as *the* pervasive psychopathology of the human subject today because of the fraught relation to language that characterizes interpersonal relations generally, which is all the more exposed, stressed, and burdened now. The Trump presidency’s increasingly frenzied disruption of the symbolic register on which we depend for mutual intelligibility, mutual mitigation of hostile drives, and the inhibition of what must be inhibited for civic life to proceed, reinforces the psychotic analogy. As I write now, in August 2020, a fence has been hastily erected around the White House to protect a president seemingly unafraid and uninhibited, yet so full of repressed desire that he fears mob reprisal as his Freudian slips indicate. We anticipate a future history being written about the present time that will make explicit the ways in which the Symbolic—not just as represented by American institutions but also as it structures our political, economic, and social remediations, protections, and goals—is being continuously disrupted and adlibbed. The result is that currently we are set adrift in a world seemingly void of signposts or, indeed, of any indexical relation to a future worth having.

Language is the limit of both the subjective experience of psychic life and of culturally imbricated communal life. And within language lies lack and desire—in other words, those motivating urges that can spur on great deeds but also great misdeeds. Language’s role is to mitigate the unspeakable, ineffable and inexpressible. Thinking in terms of psychosis is helpful, then, in recognizing and interrogating the fissures in social experience as represented in accounts of historical events, narratives of individual lives, and literary works whether these seek to represent cultural crisis or do so as slips of the tongue that reveal the personal and/or cultural unconscious at work. Lacan’s theory of psychosis as a psychopathological condition depends on his larger model of the role language plays in psychic life. Psychosis is the flattened relation to language in which the big Other can’t be heard to speak because for the speaking subject, the big Other is inaccessible through the Symbolic, which is foreclosed. The ego’s formation, to which the psychotic does have access, is established early in life precisely in order to negotiate the Real; it is necessary in order that the subject can be formed through, and find itself in, language (the Symbolic). But the ego structure is already a malformation that alienates the individual from the Real—that which lies beyond an imagined self-unity as well as beyond language, and which can be understood as the register of trauma, disorienting fracture, destabilizing experience, and threatening events. The massacre at Peterloo belongs to the Real in the sense that it destabilized the delusion of the progressivist activist giving speeches to the peacefully assembled crowd that political justice was achievable:[[11]](#endnote-11) yes, a nation’s military can be turned against its own people, as we have become aware again in the tempest of today’s political destabilizations.

Trump’s own mobilizing of militia and army troops against peaceful protesters in the rallies of Summer 2020 forces the question: are these two separate events those of the sovereign state in a “corrective” autoimmune mode that kills off dangerous cells, or are they instead psychotic events at the cultural and social level? Arguably both are the latter, for they evince the incapacity of each governing figure to meaningfully grasp the role of the big Other here. The Symbolic becomes the terrain of trauma as well as demand and desire, the unpredictable and incomprehensible Real displacing the Symbolic’s regime. To meet the protesters’ demand with lethal violence is to return us to the point before civilized life began when, according to Freud, murder—especially the murder of the father, but also the murder of brothers—need not be inhibited. It is to put us in a politically psychotic state where words are detached from their meanings, free-floating and unstable yet utilized *as if* meaningful, *as if* nondelusional, *as if* communicating the promise of being heard, and of the reciprocity that should characterize all verbal engagement. It is the detachment of words from their normative and habitual pathways that normally characterizes literary texts and accounts of lives lived.

Poetry and literature are particularly situated to take advantage of Lacan’s theory of language and symbol; they are therefore also ripe for plumbing the depths of a psychotic relation to language or its literary capture. Whereas speech is associated with the need-demand-desire of the message communicated to or reciprocated by the mother, language is the cultural invasion of the child’s body-mind field of experience by the paternal function operating as the law. Language is both how cultures form and deform individuals as subjects, and how cultural expression plays out; it is the register of the big Other, the Name-of-the-Father, and the law writ large. Language makes sense of the assemblage of images the child uses to create a unified identity by enabling it to speak as a subject; its grammar and tropes are reflexively incorporated in the mental structures that arise in conjunction with language acquisition as well as in the unconscious, which only forms with the advent of the Symbolic in the child’s newly subjective life. When things go awry, this structuration does too, and when that happens, we begin to realize how fragile the relation between our experience and our ability to express that experience is. When life itself is unpredictable, words lose their force and become “words, words, words,” to echo Hamlet again, and slanderous as well.

It might seem odd, then, to claim that symbolic language, so anchored to hierarchical, patriarchal ordering, is the field of artistic expression, not just for poetic language but more widely, for any creative art form. Psychoanalytic theory justifies this claim by appending the pleasure or jouissance of the creative act to that of language mastery. Cultural expression, as the Symbolic’s secondary aspect after instantiating the grammar of the law, is another way that the Symbolic opens itself up to artistic creation. Culturally articulated or performed expression, as in the role of representative figures of a period such as the Regency dandy, provides a rich field for locating aspects of this theoretical model at play. Cultural expression is itself figural: it involves the substitutions, condensations, image sequences, seductive play, and manipulation of desire that are inherent in verbal expression but extended into the nonverbal realm. Think Jeff Bezos, Jared Kushner, or Michelle Obama as representative of twentieth-first-century American culture in ways similar to how the Regency dandy, the Regent, or Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire metonymically represented the Romantic period. For Lacan, metonym is *the* determinant trope in human thought because it follows the associative pattern of signifiers in which the visual or imagistic is as important as the verbal, and metonyms can be telling: “the suits” (corporate executives) exemplify the subprime housing debacle for instance, and the step from there to Kushner as real estate mogul is an easy slide—and one that makes the executive leverage of the political in the Wall Street bailout even more apparent. The Regency dandy, with his obsessive regard for appearance, is equally metonymic, and the development from Brummellian dress to men’s contemporary business suits, along with the metonymic value of each stage of development (from the dandy’s tight waist and cravat to the Victorian top hat to the office suit) has been well studied.[[12]](#endnote-12) The same argument can be applied to literary works that capture the temper of the times. If metonymy replicates our thought structure, metaphor replicates that of the hierarchical regime into which a human is born; it transforms a human being into a human subject through the paternal metaphor or the Name-of-the-Father that teaches each child the rules and rights of patriarchy. Both tropes make meaning obscure and indeterminate through their deferral of absolute meaning, and more importantly, desire. And what desire points to is what can never be understood. Literature perpetually alludes to this margin of desire, to what is in excess of meaning.

At the cultural level, symptoms appear that locate the traumatic, unbearable thing that, as for subjective individual trauma, cannot be put into words. These are not only symptoms arising from the disruption of the Real into the symbolic-dependent political regime, as in civic protest; these also find expression in representative symptoms. A Regency example of a cultural symptom would be the Regent’s lack and unsatisfiable desire expressed as the insatiable collection of aesthetic objects and the appetite of the gourmand—symptoms of a wealth that does not bring the lacking thing, the phallic prowess of the crown—bears witness to such trauma (family dysfunction, forced marriage, political dissension, but also social injustice and starvation of the disenfranchised amid elitist profligacy). But in between the individual and cultural expression lies the conditions for artistic identity and self-expression that are founded on the libidinal ties to language use and meaning: these are the wordplay and word games embedded in grammar and polysemy, metaphors and alliteration. If the symbolic register and the entrance into language regulate our self-identity and behavior as a sort of mechanism of conformity, then the foreclosure of the Symbolic that a psychotic confronts in language use and word imagery means that metonymy may be more significant than metaphor for detecting desire and the difference between frisson and fracture in literary identity.

**Essays into Psychosis**

When we are thinking about ideology and the normative demands of cultural tradition and social pressures to conform, we are thinking about the writing on the wall. That is, such conformity also demands its opposite, and those rebelling against or transgressing such norms are doing so either because they are walking to a different drummer (for example, William Blake as visionary and prophet) or because try as they might to conform, the Symbolic is closed off to them, its organizational power unassimilable. Such a state offers literary exploration a way to work around the Symbolic, to envision an altered playing field. Writing that participates fully in the Symbolic is a form of inscription, but a culturally psychotic state would allow for visionary experience or poetic vision: hallucination, seeing otherwise, and then writing along altered lines. Normally, the writer is not the master of her/his own words, but is rather their productive machine, one which absorbs words and possible meanings from the environment and produces an assemblage that represents to some extent the image-assemblage produced by a unifying vision. But when the writer frees herself from the restrictive bounds of the symbolic register, we get a much more semiotically informed use of language, one closer to the French feminist analysis of resistant language.[[13]](#endnote-13) Kate Singer begins her essay with an example of just such a psychotically-inflected start to a lengthy statement from Mary Wollstonecraft: “It is the pestiferous purple which renders the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding.” The pestiferous purple progress is something Singer makes much of in order to theorize the symbolic-resistant discourse of materiality she finds being expressed in Wollstonecraft’s writing. Aesthetically “psychotic” language use often exposes human dialogue as a ritual of demand and response that is reliant on lack and desire, on the paucity of the individual and its exigencies, on its absolute dependency on the other. As Wollstonecraft’s pestiferous purple progress demonstrates, it provides a way to undermine or critique the symbolic order. Cultural psychosis, whether literary artists make anything of it or display it unwittingly, is a kind of writing on the wall, a mapping of the fragility of the human psyche under duress, under conditions that, like the pestiferous purple, are maddening. The visionary gleams admired by Wordsworth and the idealism insistently dramatized by an increasingly disenchanted Shelley are but acceptable variants of the human mind’s friability, imagination’s attempt to robustly shore up what is already fissured, already shakily in doubt.

It is this vein of understanding the particular ways in which self-alienation and ego fragmentation play themselves out, whether in a grammar of consumer behavior or poetic literary expression, that informs the following three essays. We do not all hew strictly to Lacanian analysis but take the advent of cultural fragmentation and the dismemberment of the cultural imaginary today as an opportunity to scrutinize certain texts as having larger significance, a more expansive application in relation to what might be termed cultural psychosis and in the particularity of the historical regime under discussion, “Romantic psychosis.” These essays investigate larger questions concerning the very boundaries erected by institutional and ideological structures that psychosis disrupts, overwrites, and disfigures. Some of the essays also play with language in various ways in order to disturb disciplinary assumptions and to open up our preconceptions to new ways of thinking about the subjects under scrutiny. Finally, all three essays aim to disrupt the mind/body dichotomy by tracing the psychological exploration or expression that conditions Romantic art, each one offering a different model for undertaking such projects. David Sigler’s Lacanian analysis of a late-Romantic text unpacks the fissures and breaks the voice of a female poet’s rejection of the Symbolic as the controlling register. Kate Singer’s essay reads psychic experience in Wollstonecraft through Irigaray’s counter-theory of psychoanalytic theory. And my own meditation on Beau Brummell extends Lacanian theory through Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the subject under capitalism. All three essays explore the cultural and literary expressions of the subject under pressure and the ways in which the symbolic structures that pressure, in particular historical-politico-cultural situations (like the Romantic period and the United States under Trump), to reveal the fractures in the seeming coherence of patriarchal capitalism. As Lacan points out, foreclosure of the Symbolic in psychosis creates a hole that forces the irruption into reality of the rejected signifier in question, the phallus or the object of desire. Mourning, he also points out, is merely the flip side of this: mourning is the hole ripped out of reality when the loved object is lost, an object that is often also associated with the phallus.[[14]](#endnote-14) In psychotic times there is an odd mixture of hilarity (Brummellian witticisms; Trumpisms) and mourning, a mixture my own essay registers. But a different situation is also necessary for us to comprehend the proximity rather than the distance between the cultural and the individual as well as the imaginary (in the Lacanian as well as the artistic sense) and the biological. Rather than setting them apart completely, Julie Carlson’s afterword (after words) adjudicates the disparity but also the resonances between a cultural/textual analytic of psychosis in the Lacanian sense and schizophrenia in the neuroscientific sense. Her deployment of the term “neurocosmopolitanism” frames this adjudication, while her argument for a meeting ground of the poetic field seconds this: the irruption of speech that is the signature of psychosis understood and performed as an irruption into the poetic itself. By putting both the Lacanian and neuroscientific understandings of psychosis in conversation and theorizing their meeting point, Carlson provides a way for readers to understand that instead of conflating the cultural and biological, this volume instead acknowledges their expression and reality as registers of both communal trauma and neurodiversity.

Kate Singer’s essay, “‘I feel it coming in the air tonight’: Mephitical Vapors, Pestiferous Plagues, and the Psychosis of Materiality in Wollstonecraft,” takes the volume’s argument more broadly. In focusing on the concept of jouissance, or sexual enjoyment as a painful pleasure that stands in for an impossible satisfaction, Singer locates the French feminist concept of fluid materiality as a later rendition of Romantic feminist materiality of ether and bodies: “it is the airy vapor and the dispersed new materiality that suffuses all kinds of bodies which can also diffuse its opposite, the mephitical vapor of aristocratic excess.” The democratic new materiality of the Romantic age is one that feminist thinkers were uniquely positioned to recognize, given that not just ether but bodily fluids participate in this materiality that the ancien régime denied but revolutionary thought made visible. Wollstonecraft, for instance, “entangles human objects and subjects, miasmatic and vaporous materialities in a conceptual swerve that may help us rethink the classic Lacanian relationship to the nonhuman world” in texts such as *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman*, and *Letters Written from Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. That swerve collapses the distinction between subject and object or rather between subject and partial objects, so that the Symbolic is undone by such a psychotic materiality.

That is, far from being a delusion, the intermingling of human and nonhuman bodies Wollstonecraft realizes in her writing unseats the phallic or master signifier from its (symbolic) organizing power: “thinking outside the paternalistic order . . . might both appear and be insane when it locates itself and its transformations of ontology as a reality-, or Real-, yet-to-come.” And yet if delusional, this feminine jouissanceas a resistance to such ordering is a necessary psychotic delusion if it is to be transformational, for it routes desire away from the Symbolic’s cracks and lack. In Singer’s words, “the phallic Symbolic is human while a nonphallic Symbolic would need to be posthuman” because “posthuman, shared affective materiality becomes a medium that materially shapes the signifiers and ontologies of desire.” It is a new kind of witchcraft, Singer suggests, one that allows humans to enter an ontological Real closed off to us in a symbolically ordered world.

My contribution, “Pissing on Walls: Beau Brummell, or Romantic Psychosis Writ Large,” takes the life of Beau Brummell as its text, using it to thread the mobius strip of past and present similitudes in order to understand how representative figures can speak to each other across centuries. Brummell represents the hystericized body at odds with the daunting requirements of verbal mastery and accession to the Symbolic’s promise, a body recognizable today in Trump. I argue that Brummell’s dandyism gave him a way to resist the Name-of-the-Father, as represented by the Regent himself, and to attempt to unseat the Father. The exchange of “cuts,” that telling verbal or nonverbal gesture of Regency culture, becomes the swordplay of patriarch and rebel son, the duel of power for recognition that is the Oedipal crisis and castration necessary to maintain psychic and social order. In contesting that castration, Brummell literalizes his psychotic resistance to the Law by which his body speaks for him. The Regent’s assertion of patriarchal power as representative of the Father then reveals Brummell’s self-imaging to be psychotic in its delusory self-regulation. His fall from power, as spectacularly rapid as his ascent, becomes an exercise in castrative humiliation, yet Brummell himself was apparently as self-deluded about that as he was about his ability to control and best the Regent through wit and verbal thrusts. Brummell provides an example of cultural self-production under the pressure of schizoid fissures in licit and illicit expressions of desire, jouissance, and libidinal play.

David Sigler’s “The Lime Trees of Aurora Leigh: Romanticism’s Psychotic Future” proposes that Barrett Browning far from emulating her poetic forefather Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” is so clearly referenced early in *Aurora Leigh*, is instead using Coleridge’s imagery in her epic “to enact a psychotic poetics.” Sigler interprets such a poetics to be using a forefather’s elements—here, Coleridge’s innovative conversation poem form—to create new figures, different modes of desire and pleasure, and “difficult temporalities.” Barrett Browning’s psychotic revision of Coleridge as representative of the Name-of-the-Father—that is, of poetic authority—is a resistance to Coleridge’s aggressive co-optation of the traditionally feminine poetic space of the bower. As Sigler argues, “if Coleridge’s poem proclaims the neurosis of the entrapped male poet, who resents being left behind as his friends go walking, then Barrett Browning’s poem can be said to be approaching that persona psychotically.” A psychotic poetics here, as for Wollstonecraft and Brummell, is one that resists the lawful deployment of signification and the social demand of desiring the approval of authoritative Others.

Coleridge, representing the poetic Name-of-the-Father, is the Other in question for Barrett Browning; looming large over this female epic poem, he is the interlocutor whose voice figuratively haunts the poem’s unconscious. That vocal call is made real, evading the Symbolic, through its refiguring and reassemblage in Barrett Browning’s feminine poetics. Sigler notes that “Unwilling to recognize an Other, the poem struggles to situate its protagonist in time,” producing a “strange temporality.” Moreover, “Aurora dreads that the lime tree, and thus perhaps by extension the English poetic tradition, may want something from her.” That dread announces a significant psychotic move: “The movement of the tree between Aurora’s “outer life” and “inner life,” which ultimately becomes a way for Aurora to better figure herself as a suckling infant, suggests that the psychic mechanism of foreclosure may be at work.” Indeed, because Aurora has refused the normative act of transferring her own desire to the big Other by acceding to the demand to recognize its authority, she had refused the Father’s dominance. The bower returns again as the window of Aurora’s bedroom, another effect of Barrett Browning’s turning of Coleridge’s poem “inside out,” as Sigler puts it. Effectively, *Aurora Leigh* exemplifies “the psychotic decomposition of Romantic discourse.”

Julie Carlson’s “After Word” surveys the larger field of current thought about the psychiatric, the psychoanalytic, and the neuroscientific implications of a neurocosmopolitanism that all three essays embrace and respond to. Ralph Saverese’s coinage “neurocosmopolitanism” replaces neurotypicality (the universal) with neurodiversity, a more realistic representation of the discrete ways in which the human mind-body parlays itself into someone subjected to language and linguistic self-significance but also sensitive to vibrant materiality. Such an optimistic view requires a strong caveat though: the mind/body porousness of clinically diagnosed schizophrenics and the threat posed by external objects that are experienced as penetrative so that exterior and interior are confused without the boundaries neurotypicals depend on and must try to overcome in order to think through the posthuman. Embracing that porousness puts psychotic subjects at risk. The solution is not to reject the potential for neurocosmopolitanism and schizoid imaginings but to hold it less lightly and to embrace the poetic field as a proven meeting ground for psychotic speech and affective truths, a mind/body field that thinks beyond signifiers and their structurations.

In providing this wider lens, Carlson expertly crafts a frame capable of holding together the libidinal energies, poetic meeting ground, and speculative thought with which the volume’s essays are entangled and enmeshed. As she compares and engages with the three essays and with recent work concerning neuroscience and neurocosmopolitanism, Carlson provides a reflective space for the provocations of *Romantic Psychosis*, to say nothing of its intentions and unspeakable desires. Her concluding reflection on guidance as to where to go from here and how to apply the thinking of these essays to the onto-political, even onto-theological situation we find ourselves in today (in the sense of a belief in oncoming disaster versus an ardent right-wing belief in a continuous norm of safety), asks us all to ponder the psychotic moment not just for its promise but also its very real threat.

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1. Alan Bennett’s 1991 play title is actually, *The Madness of King George III*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As Mitchell notes in reference to climate denial, even more disastrous is the truth that “When the world’s most powerful nation goes crazy, the consequences are global.” See also Mitchell’s “Present Tense: Time, Madness, and Democracy around 6 November 2018.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See the unsigned “Dana-Farber Cancer Institute; Attacks of King George III's Madness Linked to Key Metabolism Molecule,” and see Theodore Porter’s first chapter of *Genetics in the Madhouse.* See also John Wiltshire’s “Frances Burney, the Court, the King and Pathography.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. That mental health care professionals, many high placed, wrote open letters to newspapers and to Congress diagnosing then President Trump as suffering from clinical narcissism and egomania, followed up with a more recent diagnosis of paranoid obsessional neurosis and narcissism, only strengthens our belief that the political and cultural condition under such a leader suffers from a concurrent identity disintegration. (See Lance Dodes and Joseph Schachter as well as Andrew Feinberg). This allows for theorizing a parallel between the years of Trump’s dismantling of the state, beginning with his candidacy, and the Regency. In both cases, there are traumas arising from extended warfare (literal in the Romantic period, political warfare that Trump escalated traumatically for us) and sociopsychological responses to trauma. This is particularly evident in maladaptative excesses that reveal themselves to be lacks, such as excessive consumerism pursued within an unremitting machine of desire, and deeply symbolized by Manhattan’s phallic Trump Tower and Mar-a-Lago’s excessiveness. In a world marked by the fissures and ruptures of psychosis, a narcissistic leader might seem amoral but hardly abnormal. Because both narcissism and psychosis misidentify or misplace the libidinal object of desire, relationships to language, demand, and lack are also skewed as illustrated daily in Trump White House communiques and tweets (see Asawin Suebsaeng). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lacan treats *Hamlet* extensively in Seminar VI; part of his analysis of the play and Hamlet’s character as both hysteric and obsessive is that the psychotic mechanism (the rejection of the phallus as signifier) is something every subject undergoes in the period after the Oedipal crisis as he/she represses realization of the Other’s lack (*Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation*, 347). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In other words, has America experienced a broken mirror stage in which the big Other has been substituted for our ideal ego, so that now we want to be validated by the libidinous Trumpian Other? [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Although this is certainly a sexist construction based on the son’s importance in the family dynamic of Oedipal and castration effects, the Name-of-the-Father also denies to girls their desire for the absolute presence of the mother; the Law is what enables individuation from the maternal body regardless of the child’s sexual destiny. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Lacan’s Seminar, *Formations of the Unconscious*, especially “The Paternal Metaphor,” 145–62, and “Desire and Jouissance,” 235–52. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See note 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Furthermore, Freud understood that no one wanted to hear about the psychopathology of their own society: “Humanity, in the course of time, has had to endure from the hands of science two great outrages against its naive self-love. . . . But the third and most irritating insult is flung at the human mania of greatness by present-day psychological research, which wants to prove to the ‘I’ that it is not even master in its own home, but is dependent upon the most scanty information concerning all that goes on unconsciously in its psychic life. . . . We were compelled to disturb the peace of the world” (331–32). The summary of Lacan’s understanding of psychosis is from his early Seminar III; although he later revises his theory somewhat, the earlier discussion is more widely familiar to readers. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For arguments concerning Romantic-era politics as a battle over the Real, see David Collings’s *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline, and the Political Uncanny, c. 1780–1848*, and Kir Kuiken’s *Imagined Sovereignties: Toward a New Political Romanticism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See J. R. Harveyʼs *Men in Black* for a succinct account of this history. The subject has also been treated variously through the perspectives of costume history, anthropology, consumerism, and fetishism/psychoanalysis but not with Harvey’s concerted focus on the evolution of dress toward black or other somber color schemes. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. According to feminist revisions of Lacanian theory, although individuals enter into language through the two phases of infant development that usher in the imaginary and symbolic registers, poetic language itself and thus the creative imagination are both linked to the mother’s somatic soundscape (her rhythms of blood, fluids, breaths). They are also matrixed to the libidinal promise of her excess, her seeming capacity to complete and to fully satisfy the predifferentiated infant. See Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* for her seminal intervention in Lacanian theory of semiotic versus symbolic language. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lacan, *Book VI:* *Desire and Its Interpretation,* 336. Additionally, in the resolution of the Oedipal crisis, the subject mourns the loss of the phallus, which is not an object but a signifier; the subject mourns the lack not just in the Other but in him/herself (345). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)