The Romantic Abject: Cagliostro, Carlyle, Coleridge

Now the Philosophic reflection we were to indulge in, was no other than this, most germane to our subject: the portentous extent of Quackery, the multitudinous variety of Quacks that, along with our Beppo, and under him each in his degree, overran all Europe during that same period, the latter half of the last century. It was the very age of impostors, cut-purses, swindlers, double-goers, enthusiasts, ambiguous persons; quacks simple, quacks compound; crack-brained, or with deceit prepense; quacks and quackeries of all colours and kinds. How many mesmerists, Magicians, Cabalists, Swedenborgians, Illuminati, Crucified Nuns, and Devils of Loudun! To which the Inquisition-biographer adds Vampires, Sylphs, Rosicrucians, Freemasons, and an Etcetera. Consider your Schropfers, Cagliostros, Casanovas, Saint-Germans, Dr. Grahams; the Chevalier D'Eon, Psalmanazar, Abbé Paris and the Ghost of Cock Lane! As if Bedlam had broken loose; as if, rather, in that ‘spiritual Twelfth-hour of the night’, the everlasting Pit had opened itself, and from its still blacker bosom had issued Madness and all manner of shapeless Misbirths, to masquerade and chatter there.¹

In London in the 1780s – and, indeed, in Western Europe very generally – there was something like an explosion of anti-rationalism, taking the form of Illuminism, Masonic rituals, animal magnetism, millenarian speculation, astrology (and even a small revival in alchemy), and of mystic and Swedenborgian circles. (Thompson 1993: xix)

In 1833 Thomas Carlyle published a long essay on Count Cagliostro in Fraser's Magazine. It may seem an odd choice of subject – a Sicilian mountebank from the previous century, the source of whose lasting notoriety was a bit part in the Diamond Necklace Affair that rocked pre-Revolutionary France, and whose most enduring work was the confession extracted by the Roman Inquisition, a tome published in 1792, three years previous to Cagliostro's demise in an Inquisitional cell. An obscure story, perhaps, but for Carlyle
history’s unfoldings always concealed fruitful matter: not only heroes, but their shadows – not just true coin, but counterfeits – signified. Carlyle’s essay thus holds a great deal of interest for us, for in the act of identifying what was false about Cagliostro, Carlyle essays a version of the ‘true’, a separating of the wheat from the chaff that leaves us with Carlyle’s historical kernel. In the middle of this winnowing, the cultural and institutional formation we call ‘Romanticism’ begins to assume a shape. Viewing the process of Romanticism’s self-becoming it helps to focus on those moments where the Romantic encounters – throws down and expels – its necessary other. Carlyle’s essay on Count Cagliostro is just such an illuminating instance. The essay was written on the verge of the Victorian period (1833) about a figure whose career terminated in the 1790s. The essay is by a late-Romantic, about a pre-Romantic; by a member of the belated, Romantic generation (born in 1795, the same year as Keats) about one of the most sensational members of the earliest possible Romantic generation. As such, I believe it tells us something about how Romanticism was generated.

Carlyle on Cagliostro keys us into Carlyle on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another counterfeit Carlyle feels impelled to dwell upon and expose. For any historian of Romanticism as an institutional practice, few relationships hold as much interest as that between Carlyle and Coleridge. Wordsworth’s poetry may have been a decisive, practical factor in the formation of a Romantic style, but the two weightiest voices responsible for the importation and embedding of German Transcendentalism – the Kantian legacy – into the Anglo-American tradition of Romantic studies were undoubtedly Coleridge and Carlyle. That Carlyle should feel Coleridge’s impostor status, viscerally, may seem counter-intuitive, especially given Carlyle’s self-avowed vocation of identifying the heroes whose mission it is to disclose the winding ways of the ‘Divine Idea’ to the uncomprehending masses. And who, in the province of criticism, had done more than Coleridge to prepare the ground for an enlightened transcendentalism? We have a range of easy answers: jealousy, envy, rancour at being pre-empted. Carlyle’s response to Coleridge was, indeed, personal – but for Carlyle the personal and the critical were not separable. Carlyle on Cagliostro and Coleridge echo each other because both figures embodied the same transcendental quackery Carlyle felt necessary to distance from his own, more disciplined concern.2 The real surprise is that Carlyle on Coleridge anticipates Coleridge on himself.

In this chapter the motive force I trace is not the power of an idea, such as, for instance, the imagination’s transcendental capacities, but the power of an emotion: disgust or, as Julia Kristeva styles it, abjection.3 As disgust is manifestly cultural, abjection is susceptible to historical analysis.4 In the present case I aim to trace a significant theme among the first generation Romantics: revulsion, indeed horror, at materialism in general, but the body in particular. I glanced at this in the previous chapter through references to Wordsworth’s