Romantic Dynamics, or Towards a Physical Criticism

Buddhist thinkers ... find it extremely beneficial to incorporate into their thinking the insights of various scientific fields, such as quantum mechanics and neurobiology, where there are also equally strong elements of uncertainty and essencelessness.

(The Dalai Lama MindScience 26)1

I. Preludium

In Romantic studies and in wider spheres of critical theory, a dynamic approach to the interpretation of poetic events has emerged in the last decade (what I term ‘physical criticism’), and this critical mode manifested itself in the interpretive communities of several canonical Romantic authors, especially Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Shelleys. In part, this examination of Romantic poetics mapped direct connections between various writers, including poets and natural philosophers, and explored the ways in which Romantic poetical practices engage, even undermine, Enlightenment thinking and its mechanical by-products, the industrial progeny of Newton and Descartes. Physical criticism, to my mind, developed from the energetic exchange between two broadly cast categories, literature and science, and, fortunately, this interdisciplinary interchange unfolds on both sides of the dividing conjunction (‘and’), although some claim otherwise. Most recently, physical criticism has explored the rhythmic and imaginative resonances between thought experiments crafted by Romantic poets and the full range of contemporary physical theory.

This concern for the complementarity of poetical expression and physical process slowly spread through wider spheres of critical theory, as well as Romantic studies, with Arkady Plotnitsky’s
**Complementarity** and Philip Kuberski’s *Chaosmos* as two obvious examples. Plotnitsky succeeds in elaborating ‘an analytic framework suited to the requirements of the humanities and social sciences, rather than those of the natural and exact sciences’ (13), and Kuberski successfully establishes a link among the disciplines in ‘the play of determinacy and indeterminacy ... everywhere, from shifting patterns and molecules in our bodies to the circulation of signifiers that form the shifting patterns of human science, language, history and criticism’ (2). At the 1995 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, papers in the special session organized by Stuart Peterfreund articulated boundary conditions for extending the interchange between ‘literature and science’ within Romanticism itself.² Yet the perception that literary criticism generally and Romantic Studies particularly remain antithetically estranged from science, both in its age and our own, persists, as does the sense that the human sciences – of which Romantic poetry is a part – can only respond with silence to scientific claims on authority founded upon ‘the principle of verification’ (Berlin 698).

Let me give three quick examples as transition into a more detailed discussion of the interplay of physical theory and literary criticism in relation to William Wordsworth and William Blake. In *Reading the Mind of God*, the physicist James Trefil relates a conversation with his colleague E. D. Hirsch concerning the difference between their respective disciplines:

> This, then, is the fundamental difference between science and the humanities. In the former there is objective testing for correctness that is lacking in the latter. As I am fond of reminding my students, in science it is possible to start from reasonable premises, argue impeccably, and still make predictions that do not match the data. This is not the case in other disciplines.

(Trefil 38)

I suspect many share my sense that this type of ‘verifiability’ unfolds in our own classrooms, even in our own research, as hypothetical readings disintegrate when confronted with undeniable historical evidence or when critical constructions collapse for lack of direct textual support. At least, Trefil and Hirsch remain engaged in conversation, maintaining dialogic exchange, whereas the rhetorical strategies pursued by John Brockman, in *The Third Culture*, feel more overtly dismissive: