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William Keach: Arbitrary Power

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ARBITRARY POWER

1.

THE CRITICAL issues in this book are framed by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse of the arbitrary—or rather, and more precisely, by what appear to be two discourses of the arbitrary that do not, at least at the level of explicit theorization and articulation, converge. On the one hand, “arbitrary power” establishes itself in the course of the eighteenth century as the concept through which republican or liberal or even Whig political discourse names monarchical, and in some cases patriarchal, tyranny and despotism. Here are two instances that cross the conventional historical span of British Romanticism:

He saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes, and never thought of tracing the gigantic mischief up to arbitrary power, up to the hereditary distinctions that clash with the mental superiority that naturally raises a man above his fellows. (Mary Wollstonecraft on Rousseau in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792)¹

[The Tories] will yield nothing of the patronage of the Crown; and, until forced, they will lessen none of the people’s burdens. They are friendly to large military establishments; patrons of arbitrary power [at home and] abroad . . . (*The Edinburgh Review*, 1818)²

This is the overtly political discourse of “arbitrary power,” and it marks virtually all writing during the late Enlightenment and Romantic eras in which the tyrannical authority of monarchy and aristocracy is contested. It is there in the Declaration of Independence of the United States, where George III is charged with “abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rules into these Colonies.”

On the other hand, “arbitrary” gets established at the end of the seventeenth century and variously repeated and worried over through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century as the prevailing term for characterizing the distinctive features of the linguistic sign. My own preoccupation with this discursive strain began as I was trying to understand what Percy Shelley means when he says in *A Defence of Poetry* that “language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to

thoughts alone” (*SPP*, 513). My first impulse was to read forward and see Shelley anticipating a central tenet of Saussurian and post-Saussurian linguistic theory. Then I read Hans Aarsleff and realized that I also had to read backwards, against the grain of Blake- and Coleridge-induced accounts of the enemies of Romanticism, into Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.³ And there it was, of course, in the second chapter of Book 3:

Words . . . come to be made use of by Men, as the Signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain Ideas, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea. (3.2.1)⁴

Part of getting our historical bearings on Shelley’s notion of language “arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and ha[ving] relation to thoughts alone” involves our seeing in his prose and letters that he had not thought of Locke as the enemy or an enemy at all—that he had read him with great interest early in his career and kept reading and re-reading him at important junctures later on.⁵

But even with these fresh historical bearings on Shelley’s notion of language as an arbitrary production, the discourse of the arbitrary remains deeply contradictory. It is not just that Shelley’s affirmative commitment to the arbitrariness of language in the *Defence* stands so directly against the ways in which Wordsworth and Coleridge try to resist the arbitrariness of words. It is that, as Coleridge says in an often-quoted letter to Godwin, there is something arbitrary about the word *arbitrary* itself, something inherently and inescapably contradictory about it in Shelley and Locke, and in modern and postmodern theoretical discourse, too. “Arbitrary power” is the name of a problem—not just about the relation between the two aspects of the sign, but about the relation between political power and agency on the one hand and linguistic institution and performativity on the other.⁶ This problem is a constitutive feature of much that we are still trying to understand about Romantic literary ideology, practices, and institutions.

One way of moving further inside this problem, through a predictable and conservative route, is to look at the *OED* and Johnson’s *Dictionary*. Locke’s meaning of *arbitrary*—“not by any natural connexion,” “by a voluntary Imposition”—does not fully appear in either of them, although Johnson’s fourth and last definition comes closest: “Voluntary, or left to our own choice.” We are left to infer that the rather specialized linguistic meaning that Locke and his contemporaries give the word is somewhat askew to, though constantly colored by, its more common uses. What we learn from the *OED* is that the word originates in Latin as part of a

specifically legal or juridical set of terms: a noun *arbiter* (from *ad* + *belitere*), literally “one who goes to see” [an eye-witness], “one who looks into or examines,” subsequently “a judge in equity,” and from there “a supreme ruler”; and a verb *arbitrari* deriving from the legal/juridical nouns. These legal terms come into English early on, through Old French, and the legal senses remain prominent in most variants into our own day: think of *arbitrate*, *arbitration*, *arbitrator*, or *arbitrage* (the latter names a financial practice which is, as it turns out, quite often illegal). But alongside this tradition of legal meaning another tradition evolves, a tradition at times antithetical to the original ideal of looking into, examining, judging. Even in Latin of the second century A.D. (Aulus Gellius) *arbitrario* could mean “depending on the will, inclination, pleasure”; and in English by the sixteenth century *arbitrary* comes to mean “to be decided by one’s liking; dependent upon will or pleasure,” and a little later “derived from mere opinion or preference; not based on the nature of things . . . capricious, uncertain, varying,” and also “unrestrained in the exercise of will . . . despotic, tyrannical.”

This divergence in the meanings of *arbitrary* and its variants appears to arise out of the dissolution of an originally constituted social or legal authority, out of the degradation of such authority into despotism or whimsy. The divergence is strong in Johnson’s *Dictionary*. Johnson defines the adverb *arbitrarily* only as “with no other rule than the will; despotically; absolutely,” and the adjective *arbitrary* as: “1. Despotick; absolute; bound by no law; following the will without restraint . . . 2. Depending on no rule; capricious.” But when you move down the page to the verb *arbitrate*, you find Johnson returning to the cool Latin legalisms that contrast so sharply with the despotic and capricious: “1. To decide; to determine . . . 2. To judge of.”

Strikingly undeveloped and only intermittently implicit in these traditional lexicological sources is the identification of the *arbitrary* with randomness, chance. We are made indirectly aware of this difficulty in Hugh Roberts’s recent effort to “reconcile” the “skeptical” and “idealist” impulses in Shelley by rethinking the influence on him of Lucretius from a perspective informed by late twentieth-century “chaos science” and by the work of Michel Serres. In “nonlinear dynamic systems,” Roberts writes, “arbitrarily small effects have a tendency to take on a life of their own under feedback amplification,” producing “negentropic subsystems” within “a system that is globally entropic.”⁷ Though Roberts never reflects on his own use of *arbitrary* (“arbitrarily small” could have several different meanings) or on Shelley’s distinctive relation to Enlightenment discourses of the arbitrary, he brings the conceptual strategies of “chaos science” to bear on Shelley’s texts and on the complex natural and political processes they often represent (storms, revolutions) in ways

that provoke fresh questions about the place of randomness in his writing, and that bring into sharp focus the distinction between modes of the arbitrary that depend on human agency (whether tyrannical or capricious) and modes that do not. I will have more to say later about the arbitrary as mere contingency. What I want to insist on here is that in both political and linguistic frames of reference it is not only the doubleness of the *arbitrary*—its signifying at once absolute determination and utter indeterminacy—that characterizes the problematic I am attempting to define. It is also the interaction between the terms of the doubleness—the historical and social processes through which what is initially random and contingent becomes absolute, or conversely through which absolute will and authority give way to the random and contingent.

When we go back to Locke and Shelley with the contradictory or at least divergent semantic history of arbitrariness in mind and look at how they use *arbitrary* and its variants in contexts that are not explicitly linguistic, we may be struck by how oddly the nonlinguistic uses sit next to the neutral or celebratory sense of phrases such as “a Word made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*” and “language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination.” Here is Locke in *The Second Treatise of Government* (1689), in a passage I am sure Wollstonecraft was remembering in her sentence on Rousseau, speaking “of Paternal, Political, and Despotical Power, considered together”:

Paternal or Parental Power is nothing but that, which Parents have over their Children, to govern them for the Childrens good, till they come to the use of Reason. . . . The Affection and Tenderness, which God hath planted in the Breasts of Parents, towards their Children, makes it evident, that this is not intended to be a severe Arbitrary Government, but only for the Help, Instruction, and Preservation of their Off-spring. (Ch. 15, sec. 170)

And here again is Locke, in the next section, on “Political Power”:

Political Power is that Power which every Man, having in the state of Nature, has given up into the hands of the Society. . . . with their express or tacit Trust, that it shall be employed for their good. . . . it can have no other *end or measure* . . . but to preserve the Members of that Society in their Lives, Liberties, and Possessions; and so cannot be an Absolute, Arbitrary Power over their Lives and Fortunes. (Ch. 15, sec. 171)

Locke’s political uses of *arbitrary* are consistently negative in this way and coincide exactly with Johnson’s definition—“Despotick . . . following the will without restraint . . . capricious.” In Shelley’s political writing the word has a wider and more subtly graded range of meanings: in the *Essay on Christianity*, for instance, he can say that “some benefit has not failed to flow from the imperfect attempts which have been made to

erect a system of equal rights to property and power upon the basis of arbitrary institutions" (WPBS 6: 252). But for Shelley, too, the predominant ethical and political meanings of *arbitrary* are negative: "The savage brutality of the populace is proportioned to the arbitrary character of their government" (*A Philosophical View of Reform*, WPBS 7: 51).

Beyond making evident this divergence between the overtly political and the linguistic uses of *arbitrary* in Locke and Shelley, what the instances I have cited help us see is that *arbitrary* is a word deeply and inextricably embedded in material and political life, and that Locke's effort to give it a neutral philosophical meaning in his crucial attempt to confine linguistic signification to the interaction of "articulate sounds" and "ideas"—bracketing the entire process of referring to the world of "things"—and Shelley's related conviction that language is "produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone"—are both shadowed by the material and political frames of reference and value they momentarily set aside. Listen again to Locke's formulation: in speaking of "voluntary Imposition," he claims a remarkable kind and degree of power for the mind in its verbal invention and operations, a power that functions independently—at least in the context of Book 3 of the *Essay*—of "things" and nature. And while he goes on in this part of Book 3 to speak of the "Advantage of Society" and its dependence on "Communication of Thoughts," he says almost nothing about how this collective social impulse manifests itself through "voluntary Imposition," through the "arbitrary" appropriation of certain sounds for certain ideas. Locke never looks analytically at arbitrary linguistic institution, at "voluntary Imposition," as a collective historical process. "Voluntary" carries with it the ancient notion of words being instituted *ad placitum*—"according to what is pleasing, agreeable, acceptable"—and reproduces the ambiguity of the Latin phrase. As expounded in the *Essay* Locke's idea of the arbitrary has little explicitly to do with notions of "convention," "compact," or "custom," though it has often been assumed that these are the notions he intends by "arbitrary," and though later in the eighteenth century some of Locke's followers slide loosely back and forth between *arbitrary* and terms for referring to socially instituted signs.⁸ As a result, Locke's linguistic discourse of the arbitrary is left confusingly vulnerable to those senses of the "despotic," "willful," and "capricious" that are dominant in his political discourse of the arbitrary.

With Shelley's passage on language in the *Defence*, the case is even more striking. "Poetry," he says, "expresses those arrangements of language . . . which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." Shelley the radical democrat and revolutionary is suddenly associating "language arbitrarily produced by the Imagination" with an "imperial faculty" whose seat of power, a

“throne,” is usually a figure for the despotic patriarchal authority he detests. And he goes on to celebrate language for being “more plastic and obedient to the controul of that faculty of which it is the creation.” Not only is this language about the power that produces language politicized, but it is politicized in a direction that runs directly counter to Shelley’s explicit political convictions and ideals.⁹ His sense of the imagination’s verbal power is verbally at odds with his sense of political power, and this being at odds has to do with his using the term *arbitrary*, as Locke does, to deny that linguistic signs are constituted through a “natural connexion” rooted in things, to restrict the signifying representational function of language “to thoughts alone.”

In the political language of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, *arbitrary* is the epithet of power that is unnatural, irrational, and unrepresentative, in that it does not derive or arise from the represented will of citizens who make up the polity. As such, it names a condition of political tyranny or despotism that may be either absolute or capricious, or both. In linguistic discourse, however, *arbitrary* is the epithet of a power that is socially, but not naturally or rationally, constitutive: words originate through collective acts of “Imposition” (Locke) or “institution” that are not founded in nature or reason. In the historical course of communicative use, they evolve in ways that may be or should be—but rarely are—both natural and rational.

2.

Far from having been resolved in post-Saussurian semiotic theory, the Enlightenment and Romantic problems that inhere in the discourse of the arbitrary sign have persisted and confounded efforts to relate language as a formal system to its social origins, functions, and meanings. Derrida takes note of the difficulty in *Of Grammatology* by calling *arbitrary* a “gross” misnomer, but he never pauses to elaborate a sustained critique of the term itself; his musings on Warburton and hieroglyphics in the 1979 essay “Scribble” are tantalizing and provocative but finally elusive on this point.¹⁰ 1979 was a productive year for pronouncements about “arbitrary power.” There is de Man in “Shelley Disfigured,” saying that in *The Triumph of Life* “the positing power of language is both entirely arbitrary in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it. It stands beyond the polarities of chance and determination and can therefore not be part of a temporal sequence of events.”¹¹ De Man’s distinction between “entirely arbitrary” and “entirely inexorable” creates the significant opening for further intervention here. And there is Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semi-*

otics, putting valuable critical pressure on such received semiotic binarisms as “conventional vs. natural” and “arbitrary vs. motivated” (the latter binarism may be taken to epitomize one version of the problem I am posing) and arguing that even so-called iconic signs are arbitrarily coded.¹² In general, however, semiotic and poststructuralist theory has tended to move on by taking the principle of arbitrariness as established and no longer interestingly problematic.¹³ This tendency is itself, I am arguing, a problem.

Within some sectors of theoretical linguistics, though not within currently dominant academic styles of the philosophy of language, the debate about arbitrary signs has been kept alive.¹⁴ In *Reading Saussure* (1987), Roy Harris situates his discussion of the principle of arbitrariness within what he calls a “prolonged controversy, which still continues,” though the books and articles in this part of his bibliography are not widely known to most of us working in literary and cultural studies. Harris emphasizes both the uncompromising priority of the principle of arbitrariness for Saussure and its apparent contradictoriness and obscurity.¹⁵ One difficulty, noted but dealt with only briefly by Harris, is famously thrown into relief by Emile Benveniste in his 1939 paper on “The Nature of the Linguistic Sign.” Saussure’s account of arbitrariness, Benveniste claims, “is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term which was not included in the initial definition [of the sign as an arbitrary relation of “sound-image” and “concept”]. This third term is the thing itself, [material] reality.” Benveniste’s example is Saussure’s own: Saussure can only claim that the two French “sound-images” *böf* and *oks* arbitrarily signify the same concept by referring covertly to the actual animal in the world from which that concept is derived.¹⁶ Harris deals with this objection by insisting that Saussure’s principle of arbitrariness applies only to the level of *la langue* and “has nothing to do with *la parole*,” with historically and socially situated acts of language use. But as Harris later acknowledges, questions of reference do bear importantly on linguistic change and continuity at the level of *langue*; the bracketing of the world of things in Saussure, as in Shelley and Locke, may defer but can never resolve key questions about linguistic agency and institution. Harris usefully articulates the fundamental tension in Saussure: “although *la langue* is a social institution—and in certain respects the very archetype of a social institution—its arbitrariness gives it a structural autonomy vis à vis society” (69). So language is archetypally social, but neither the individual nor the social collective “has any power to alter either *signifiant* or *signifié*.” “[T]he *Cours* is committed both to the proposition that the linguistic sign is arbitrary and also to the proposition that *la langue* is a social institution,” Harris continues. “The latter proposition, however, is left in considerably deeper obscurity than the

former” (81). It is in fact the interdependence of these two sources of Saussurian obscurity that I want to insist upon. When Harris draws out the obscurity of Saussure’s insistence on language as a social institution by saying that “language is imposed on its speakers, not agreed to by them” (8), he is in fact rearticulating the problem of arbitrariness—the problem lurking in Locke’s appeal to “voluntary Imposition,” in Shelley’s figure of the linguistic imagination as an “imperial faculty.”

The status of these questions within the tradition of Chomskyan generative grammar—a tradition usually taken to be antithetical to that of Lockean-Saussurian semiotics—is a complicated matter, particularly when pursued historically with reference to Chomsky’s own effort to link his work to Cartesian rationalism and to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of universal or general grammar.¹⁷ Shifting the terrain of the discussion from that of the constitution and operation of the sign to the production of the grammatical and syntactic sequence immediately situates the problem of the arbitrary very differently. Oswald Ducrot helpfully summarizes the position of the seventeenth-century *Port-Royal* grammarians, whom Chomsky especially looks to as his predecessors: “To the extent that the logical aspect of grammar is regarded as its deepest level and that the idiomatic specificities only graft themselves onto it secondarily, language, from the perspective of the general grammars, may be regarded as fundamentally motivated and only accidentally arbitrary.”¹⁸ What this formulation catches is how theoretically loose the discourse of universal grammar gets when it comes to addressing that aspect of linguistic experience that it regards as secondary. Saying that language production is “accidentally arbitrary” exposes, among other things, the limitations in the opposition of “motivated” to “arbitrary” as it operates here. For Chomsky and the tradition with which he identifies his work, language is arbitrary, but only at the level of historical particularity and contingency that he often relegates to a secondary realm of “external stimulus.” Steven Pinker can toss off the claim that “words have stable meanings, linked to them by arbitrary convention,” without breaking his stride in *The Language Instinct* (1994)—and without pausing to consider what this claim means for his account of “How the Mind Creates Language.”¹⁹ At the level of those “linguistic universals” that make possible the generation of infinite meaningful possibilities from finite cognitive structures—and that are understood with increasing conviction to be “hard-wired” in the human brain—at this level, language is said by the Chomskyans to be anything but arbitrary.

The Chomskyan vantage point is important to my argument because of the degree to which it converges with the anti-arbitrariness strain in Romantic thinking about language. Chomsky’s *Cartesian Linguistics* warmly embraces not just Descartes, Arnauld, and Lancelot, but Herder,

Coleridge, the Schlegels, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. The second item in Chomsky's bibliography is *The Mirror and the Lamp*. This is of interest not simply because of the Romantic campaign to sustain a belief in the "natural" as against the "arbitrary" sign, but because that campaign was intermittently invested in a grammatical rather than a semiotic approach to the sources of linguistic authority and agency. In Coleridge's unfinished manuscript "treatises" that have come to be known as the *Logic*, the focus is on what he calls a "grammatical discourse" that "reflects the forms of the human mind" (CC, 18). Drawing on Berkeley's speculations about a divinely authorized grammar encoded in the natural world and imperfectly reflected in human language (*Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710) and on James Harris's *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Universal Grammar* (1751), Coleridge works his way toward a transcendentalist grammar that absorbs the problem of the arbitrary sign into a constitutive "unity of apperception . . . presupposed in . . . all consciousness" and active in fully potentiated human discourse.²⁰ I will return momentarily to an earlier stage in Coleridge's contention with arbitrariness. The point of emphasis here is not its identity but its companionability with the Chomskyan position.

The problem of the arbitrary has also had a vexed place within the tradition of historical and cultural materialism. In his chapter on "Language" in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams draws extensively on Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and argues that the latter was able to preserve many of the strengths of Saussure's insistence on thinking about language as an autonomous system of signs while at the same time overcoming the two debilitating restrictions that Saussure—and Locke before him—had depended upon: the strategic severing of the connection between words and material things on the one hand, and the bracketing of social reality into a deferred formal abstraction on the other. In seeing "The process of [linguistic] articulation" as "necessarily . . . a material process," Williams writes of Vološinov, "the sign itself becomes part of a (socially created) physical and material world":²¹ "consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse" (13). In making this case, Williams demonstrates how troublesome the term *arbitrary* can be:

The relation within the sign between the formal element and the meaning which this element carries is . . . inevitably conventional (thus far agreeing with orthodox semiotic theory), but it is *not* arbitrary and, crucially, it is not fixed. On the contrary the fusion of formal element and meaning . . . is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language. . . . signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited (37).

In a note on this passage, Williams explains that it is the sense of *arbitrary* as “random” or “casual” that he opposes, and this at least has the virtue of facing up to, if not resolving, some of the unstable implications of the word in Locke, Shelley, and Saussure. But Williams says nothing about that other pattern of implication, the “despotic” or “tyrannical,” even in his later discussion of “domination” and “hegemony.” It is never made clear why what he calls the “real process of social development” and “the actual activities of speech” rule out acts of linguistic power—“Imposition,” to use Locke’s word—that are *arbitrary* in senses other than “conventional,” that are either “random” or “tyrannical.” A fully realized Marxist account of language as socially produced and subject to change needs to be clearer on this fundamental issue.

Williams is important to Tony Bennett’s *Formalism and Marxism* (1979), a book that takes us back into an aspect of Saussure’s thinking that, as Harris makes evident, is easy to lose touch with—back into Saussure’s own remarks about the connection between “The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign” and the historical and social dimension of language. At the level of theoretical principle, the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, Bennett says, “does not constitute a flight away from historical considerations so much as a mode of entry into them.” Bennett quotes Jonathan Culler on this point: “Because it is arbitrary, the sign is totally subject to history, and the combination at a particular moment of a given signifier and signified is a contingent result of the historical process.”²² This is consistent with Harris’s reading of Saussure. More emphatically than Harris, however, Bennett demonstrates the degree to which Saussure’s formal position becomes obscure and contradictory once you try to work with it in the realm of material historicity and temporality. As Saussure puts his principle of arbitrariness into play, “Chance and necessity . . . play a gleeful game of tag with one another,” Bennett writes, “as first one and then the other is allowed a central role” (73). In the end Saussure’s principle of arbitrariness is “crucially debilitating,” Bennett argues, because although it allows for the essential principle of historical variation, it never explains the historical determination it also implies. Like Williams, Bennett looks back to Vološinov and Bakhtin and calls for “a theory of language which will explain the particular unity of form and meaning established by the system of signs which constitute language with reference to the socially based and historically changing linguistic practices on which the system rests” (77–78). This call for a critical ideological semiotics that can incorporate the Chomskyans’ findings about the common human capacity for syntactic production is appealing. But we are still left wondering whether the contradictory forces swirling around and through the word *arbitrary* in Saussure’s “gleeful game of tag” are to be so optimistically subdued or

subsumed, particularly in texts where a writer willingly submits to or willfully resists constraints and possibilities understood as arbitrary. Bennett's 1979 appeal signaled, in any case, unfinished work for Marxist theories of language.

Some of the most important resources for carrying this work forward are to be found, I believe, in the writing of the late Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's relation to Marxism is nowhere more complex than in his analysis of language. Even those intent on differentiating Bourdieu's from a "traditional type of Marxist analysis" have had to acknowledge that "his work is deeply influenced by Marx's approach."²³ Yet in important respects Bourdieu positions himself at a critical distance from existing Marxist paradigms; his 1984 essay "Social Space and the Genesis of 'Classes'" sees itself as making a "break with the Marxist tradition" in terms that have come to sound all too familiar in post-1968 French theory (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 233). Bourdieu's self-positioning is different, however, from that of the poststructuralists: his "break" with Marxism often has the effect of returning us to the fundamental principles and commitments of this tradition and is crucial to what enables him to contribute so productively to the unfinished Marxist project of grasping language as a social and historical system and process.

In the essays comprising *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu begins by emphasizing the theoretical and descriptive limitations "constituted, in the work of Saussure, by the exclusion of all inherent social variation, or, as with Chomsky, by the privilege granted to the formal properties of grammar to the detriment of functional constraints" (32). Bourdieu resumes this orienting critique at the beginning of "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language," where it clears the theoretical space for an alternative paradigm, that of "the linguistic market," in which different social groups with different, often conflicting interests exercise their competency in deploying the resources of the formal language system (understood both as Saussurian *langue* and as Chomskyan generative grammar). Though the model of a "linguistic market" may appear to be anti- or non-Marxist, it is in fact deeply convergent with Marx's own approach to human social behavior in capitalist society—and in all forms of society hierarchically structured primarily by class and secondarily by other "distinctions." For Bourdieu, language must be understood in terms of "an economy of symbolic exchanges" in which there exists, on the one hand, "the socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus . . . which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate [in Chomsky's sense] an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation" and, on the other hand, "the structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system

of specific sanctions and censorships” (37). “What circulates on the linguistic market,” he argues, “is not ‘language’ as such, but rather discourses that are stylistically marked both in their production . . . and in their reception” (39).

Within this framework Bourdieu addresses the problem of the arbitrary in ways that are diversely enabling for an exploration of Romantic language theories, practices, and institutions. His sense of the interactive doubleness of the arbitrary—of the processes through which the unmotivated and the random acquire the force of absolute power and authority—pervades his account of the social construction of “legitimate language”:

[I]f one fails to perceive both the special value objectively accorded to the legitimate use of language and the social foundations of this privilege, one inevitably falls into one or other of two opposing errors. Either one unconsciously absolutizes that which is objectively relative and in that sense arbitrary, namely the dominant usage, failing to look beyond the properties of language itself, such as the complexity of its syntactic structure, in order to identify the basis of the value that is accorded to it, particularly in the educational market; or one escapes this form of fetishism only to fall into the naïvety *par excellence* of the scholarly relativism which forgets that the naïve gaze is not relativist, and ignores the fact of legitimacy, through an arbitrary relativization of the dominant usage, which is socially recognized as legitimate, and not only by those who are dominant. (52–53)

Bourdieu writes with an awareness of the dialectical historicity of the arbitrary that is very close at times to what we find in Williams, though unfortunately Williams and those shaped by his kind of cultural materialism form no part of what Bourdieu in the early 1980s understands as “the Marxist tradition.”²⁴ What particularly concerns Bourdieu is the process through which “political unification and the accompanying imposition of an official language establish relations between *the different uses of the same language* which differ fundamentally from the theoretical relations (such as that between *mouton* and ‘sheep’ which Saussure cites as the basis for the arbitrariness of the sign) between different languages, spoken by politically and economically independent groups” (53). What “political unification and the accompanying imposition [remember Locke’s ‘voluntary Imposition’] of an official language” mean historically for Bourdieu comes to carry powerful implications for Romanticism as a cultural formation produced by the conflict between the older monarchies and the new actually existing or emergent bourgeois republics. “Until the French Revolution,” Bourdieu writes, “the process of linguistic unification went hand in hand with the process of constructing

the monarchical state.” “[T]he Revolutionary policy of linguistic unification” involved a very different regime of language “imposition”:

[The] imposition of the legitimate language in opposition to the dialects and *patois* was an integral part of the political strategies aimed at perpetuating the gains of the Revolution through the production and the reproduction of the ‘new man’. . . . To reform language, to purge it of the usages linked to the old society and impose it in its purified form, was to impose a thought that would itself be purged and purified. . . . The conflict between the French of the revolutionary intelligentsia and the dialects or *patois* was a struggle for symbolic power in which what was at stake was the *formation* and *re-formation* of mental structures. In short, it was not only a question of communicating but of gaining recognition for a new language of authority. (46–48)

Bourdieu opens up critical new dimensions of the problem of the arbitrary. Not only does “arbitrary” name a place of conflicted convergence between language (as formal system) and political power, between the imagined acts of “imposition” through which signs are initially constituted and the social process through which the semiotic vestiges of “voluntary Imposition” are themselves “imposed.” “Arbitrary” also names the linguistic aspect of nation-formation under the conditions of class rule that obtain within a representative republic. In terms closer to home, “arbitrary power” in this sense applies not only to King George III but to those of his former subjects prepared to revolt against his power and form a republic independent of his authority.

3.

The theoretical and historical problematic I have been setting out implies a range of specific questions about the interrelationships among political determination and contingency, linguistic representation, and literary form in Romantic writing. On my way to exploring some of these questions in depth in the chapters that follow, I want to suggest more broadly their centrality to ongoing debates about language, social and political conflict, and the writing that we have come to think of as characteristically or distinctively “Romantic.”

The Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* is a contradictory effort to counter or minimize the arbitrary power of language. The fundamental point of linguistic reference in the Preface is what Wordsworth calls “language really used by men.” And in the familiar passage where Wordsworth contracts his ideal of “language really used by men” to the

language of “Humble and rustic life,” he makes explicit his antagonistic sense of the arbitrary:

The language . . . of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language . . . is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation. (*PWWW* 1: 124)

Wordsworth is responding directly here to Locke’s doctrine that words are signs of ideas, not of “objects,” and that they exist as signs not by virtue of any “natural connexion” but “arbitrarily,” “by a voluntary Imposition.” The term “arbitrary” in the Preface takes on a significance, political as well as poetic, that cannot simply be limited to Wordsworth’s polemic against the artifice of eighteenth-century poetic diction.

In articulating his idea of “language really used by men” who “hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived,” Wordsworth appears to address exactly those two spheres of experience that semiotic ways of thinking about language, whether Locke’s or Saussure’s, bracket or ignore: actual social life and the material world. Wordsworth’s appeal sounds in many ways like Raymond Williams’s appeal to “a real process of social development,” to “the actual activities of speech.” Of course Williams would say that Wordsworth’s delimitation of “language really used by men” to “Humble and rustic life” does not constitute “a real process of social development” at all, but rather a primitivist ideal abstracted from actual social and historical conditions and invoked on behalf of other ideological considerations. And he would be right: what is most striking about Wordsworth’s linguistic and social range of reference is how coercively he has to manipulate it to accommodate his own poetic practice. Even as Wordsworth appeals (in a sentence I omitted from the quotation above) to “the *necessary* character of rural occupations” in his campaign against “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression,” he has to “purify” the language of those occupations from “its real defects.” (One wonders whether these “defects” are themselves “necessary” or “arbitrary.”) Certainly Wordsworth’s acts of purification or “selection” (as he says else-

where) involve an arbitrary compositional power both in their being “voluntary Impositions” and, at times, in their being “despotic.” It is partly because he knows he has to perform these acts that Wordsworth says so little in the Preface about “these men” talking to each other—it leaves him freer to do their poetic talking for them. They talk instead with nature; they “hourly communicate with the best objects.”

This reading of Wordsworth’s Preface differs somewhat from Olivia Smith’s account in *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (1984). “The thesis which the Preface argues,” she says, is “that language is a democratic vehicle of expression.”²⁵ Smith convincingly maintains that “‘Arbitrary’ refers . . . throughout the Preface . . . to what is socially imposed and socially divisive,” and that “at its simplest” the Preface claims “that the rustic does not suffer the risk of ‘arbitrary’ connections between words and ideas.”²⁶ But she overestimates Wordsworth’s success in evading “‘arbitrary’ connections between words and ideas” on behalf of a “democratic” view of language. The difficulty is partly a matter of political tone of voice: it is hardly “democratic” of Wordsworth to claim that “these men,” “from their rank in society, and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse . . . convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.” No wonder the *Anti-Jacobin* was not disturbed by the politics of *Lyrical Ballads*. More importantly, Wordsworth himself knows that he cannot use the language of peasants to escape from the arbitrariness of language and says so near the end of the Preface: “[M]y language may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connexions of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself.” This is the attitude that finally prevails in Wordsworth, the recognition, as he says in the *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface to Poems* (1815), “that the medium through which, in poetry, the heart is to be affected, is language; a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations” (PWWW 3: 82).

Granting to or finding in language a distinctive power to affect the heart has a long tradition in eighteenth-century discourses of sentiment and sensibility, and of what would come to be called aesthetic theory. Not all such discourses regard Lockean semiotics as antithetical to their affective emphasis. It is a strength of Tom Furniss’s chapter titled “The labour and profit of language” in *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology* (1993) that he sees how readily and with what contradictory results “Burke invokes the authority of Locke” in the *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Burke’s unstable relation to Locke’s philosophy of words is significant in ways that include a powerful and still-debated influence on Wordsworth. The *Enquiry* depends, Furniss argues, on a belief that the mind has “an unmediated engagement with reality”—with words-as-sounds and, through them, with things

(“it is not only of those ideas which are commonly called abstract . . . but of particular real beings, that we converse without having any idea of them excited in the imagination”; *Enquiry*, 170)—a belief that Burke grounds in Locke’s alleged assertion that “the senses are the great original of all our ideas.”²⁷ At the same time Burke not only accepts Locke’s premise that words are arbitrary, not natural, signs of ideas and therefore of things but links this to his argument for the immediate affective power of language: “[S]o far is a clearness of imagery from being absolutely necessary to an influence upon the passions, that they may be considerably operated upon without presenting any image at all, by certain sounds adapted to that purpose” (*Enquiry*, 60). It is this stress on the immediate emotive effects of words as mere “sounds” that allows Furniss to argue that “Burke begins from what ostensibly looks like a Lockean view of language in order to celebrate precisely what Locke would remedy”—the tendency of language to generate irrational, passionate states of mind (*Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology*, 99). Language for Burke in the *Enquiry* functions “independently of referents or concepts” (101) and according to an “arbitrary” dynamic that is shifted away from the Lockean notion of “voluntary Imposition” toward what will later become the characteristic Burkean ideas of “habit,” “custom,” and “prejudice.”

The political implications of Burke’s emotive and affective account of the arbitrariness of language play themselves out in even more deeply contradictory ways in his writing of the 1790s. Already in the *Enquiry* the affirmed immediacy of connection between “sound” and “emotion” that is central to Burke’s analysis of the literary sublime is also a source of anxiety about the disposition of the “common sort of people” to respond to what they hear or read solely through “their passions” (61). As Furniss argues, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* this anxiety returns and is extended to “the people’s susceptibility to the sublime,” to “the condition which enables their repression within the traditional order and, at the same time, . . . makes them responsive to . . . the ‘republican’ or ‘radical’ sublime”: “It is necessary for Burke that the people should be motivated and manipulated by power rather than knowledge, yet this is precisely what makes them dangerous” (*Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology*, 103). In the subsequent discussion of how the Burkean sublime becomes “a ‘revolutionary’ aesthetic which depends for its very power on a particular *relation* to custom,” and of how “discourses of tradition and revolution become mirror images of one another,” there is an element of rhetorical formalism in Furniss’s argument that tends to minimize the specific historical content of “revolutionary” and turn it into little more than a rhetorical category. Yet his account very usefully shows, along lines that need to be reinforced by Bourdieu’s analysis in “The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language,” that the

problem of the arbitrary does not disappear but is profoundly transformed in the movement from monarchy to republic.

The question of which class in society is imagined as either agent or subject to the arbitrary power of language is recurrently determinative in Romantic discourse. When Coleridge takes issue in chapter 17 of the *Biographia Literaria* with Wordsworth's claim that "the best part of language is originally derived" from the kind of "communicat[ion]" with the "best objects" of nature characteristic of peasants, he does so in terms that momentarily draw him surprisingly close to Locke and to Shelley: "The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man" (CC 2: 54). The phrase "by a voluntary appropriation" sounds like an effort to turn Locke's "by a voluntary Imposition" in a more comfortable direction. Like Shelley, and in keeping with one of the deepest impulses in Romantic language theory, Coleridge appropriates for the poet working *within* an already existing language a power that Locke ascribes to the origination of language. Thus the arbitrary institution of linguistic signs comes to be exuberantly transferred by Shelley, through what we might call the trope of perpetual origination, to a celebration of poetic agency and production. Coleridge is far more cautious, and more critical of the Lockean principle (the tension between "fixed symbols" and "internal acts," "processes and results of imagination," is the clearest indication of this). The most striking moment in his early thinking about these matters comes in the letter to Godwin of 22 September 1800, where he responds to the first volume of John Horne Tooke's *EPEA PTEROENTA, or The Diversions of Purley*.

I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them—in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tooke's System, and to solve the great Questions—whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the *semblance* of pre-designing Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a *series* of such actions are possible—and close on the heels of this question would follow the old 'Is Logic the *Essence* of Thinking?' in other words—Is *Thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? &—how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? (CLSTC 1: 625)²⁸

Like Derrida, Coleridge sees the discourse of the "arbitrary" as a negative instance of itself, as a misnaming of the fundamental semiotic relationship. His organicist reaction to this misnaming is of course deeply un-Derridian. His questions to Godwin simultaneously collapse the

bracketed and deferred sphere of reference into signification, and push both in the direction of a constitutive transcendental symbolization. In a double sense Coleridge wants words to be instances of what he will later call *natura naturans*: he wants them to be “part” of the organic processes they refer to and signify, and the best evidence the mind offers of its own deep unity with natural process.²⁹ Coleridge is by implication already anticipating generative grammarians like Chomsky and Pinker, with their methodological preferences for transformational “roots” and “trees,” with their elaborate diagrams of “right-branching” and “left-branching” syntactic structures. Coleridge does all this in hopeful opposition to his radical friend Horne Tooke, whose revision of the Lockean principle of arbitrariness assumes that language develops primarily through a social imperative of quicker, more efficient communication.³⁰

The range of practical stylistic consequences of the conditions and conceptualizations of language I have been investigating becomes evident when we move from Wordsworth, Burke, and Coleridge to Byron, whose writing enacts by opportunistically revelling in the linguistic arbitrary in its contradictorily domineering and capricious, absolute and random, modes of operation, in contexts where both “arbitrary power” in the explicit political sense, and the liberal discourse of “convention,” “compact,” and “contract,” are recurrently at stake. The most prominent stylistic marker of the Byronic arbitrary is rhyme, an aspect of his writing with contradictory political attachments that I will look at in detail in chapter 3. Byron comes to see rhyme as an occasion for performative rhetoric that produces willfulness from whimsy, strength from chance:

If I sneer sometimes,
It is because I cannot well do less,
And now and then it also suits my rhymes.
(*Don Juan* 13. 58–60)

Jerome Christensen reads these lines as generalizing the gesture by which Byron disposes of the dead Cockney highwayman Tom two cantos earlier: “But Tom’s no more—and so no more of Tom. / Heroes must die . . .” (11. 153–54). “That Tom can die to suit the poet’s rhyme is the condition of possibility for the condition that Lyotard calls *Auschwitz*,” Christensen writes, deliberately pushing the performative implications of Byron’s aristocratic strength over the top.³¹ This is also the “condition of possibility” for that act of linguistic and narrative coercion and opportunism in which the poem originates, or at least with which it begins: wanting a hero, Byron finds “Barnave, Brissot,” and a whole list of “many of the military set, / Exceedingly remarkable at times, / But not at all adapted to my rhymes” (1. 17–24). The anglicizing imposition that compels “Ju-an” into rhyming convergence with “new one” and “true

one” signifies Byron’s larger imposition on the legendary narrative of aristocratic seduction and damnation. That such imposition depends upon and is constrained by patterns of semiotic chance at once peculiar to English and shaped by a formal stanzaic convention borrowed from Italian poetry determines—establishes the terms for, sets the limits of—Lord Byron’s arbitrary performance.

One more brief excursion into the unfinished debates within semiotic theory will suggest what is at issue in Byron’s representing himself as “The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme” (11. 440). Contending with Saussure’s claim that “the arbitrary character of *la langue* fundamentally distinguishes it ‘from all other [social] institutions,’” Harris argues that “other social institutions (political, religious, legal, economic, etc.) deal with things which are already interconnected, directly or indirectly, in a variety of non-arbitrary ways.” In contrast to the “superficial arbitrariness of the price” in market capitalism, for example, “the profound arbitrariness of the linguistic sign” means that “it would make no difference to” any specific “linguistic transaction” whether the signifier-component of a given word were what it is or something else. “It would make no difference to the linguistic transaction (the act of *parole*),” Harris says, “if the word for ‘sister’ were not *soeur* but *zoeur*, or *soeuf*, or *pataphu*” (*Reading Saussure*, 67–68). Harris’s generally insightful analysis is wrong here in ways that can disable us from understanding the possibilities of rhyme and of puns. It does make a difference that the word in French for “sister” is *soeur*, because (putting the case negatively) a French poet cannot do what Byron does with this sign. In Canto 14 Lord Henry Amundeville departs from Lady Adeline “and, as [he] went out, calmly kiss’d her, / Less like a young wife than an aged sister” (14. 551–52). You cannot do this exact thing in any language but English, any more than you can work Shakespearean changes on semantically antithetical rhymes like “womb” and “tomb,” or “breath” and “death.” The fundamental arbitrariness of linguistic signs generates possibilities distinctive to particular languages; the chance convergence that Byron rather predictably seizes upon here is as English as Lord Henry (“He was a cold, good, honourable man, / Proud of his birth,” 14. 553) and Lady Adeline (“Cool, and quite English, imperturbable,” 13. 108) themselves.

Byron understands that the arbitrary constraints of rhyme are its arbitrary possibilities, and he exploits this peculiar resource again and again not just to assert a lordly or imperious strength against, but to situate such strength within, what he sees as a national culture in decline. But since Byron also has the strongest claim to an internationalist position of any English Romantic writer, his translingual or interlingual rhyming and punning are worth thinking about from just this perspective. So is his ironic assimilation of Regency political and social idiom. Dudù’s confu-

sion about her dream in the harem episode of *Don Juan* provokes the narrator to comment on the arbitrariness of his own dreams:

I've known some odd ones which seemed really planned
 Prophetically, or that which one deems
 "A strange coincidence," to use a phrase
 By which such things are settled now-a-days.
 (6. 621–24)

The quoted phrase, identified in the 1832–1833 *Works* as having been used by one of Queen Caroline's parliamentary defenders in dismissing her alleged sexual transgressions, captures something strange about dreams—and about the couplet rhyme that comments on and instances "A strange coincidence": "phrase" / "now-a-days." British national identity and party politics—specifically the Whig discourse that had a lasting claim on Byron and in which "arbitrary power" names the abuses of aristocracy, monarchy, and empire—become the reference points for sarcastically condemning the post-Napoleonic version of the new world order.

4.

In political theory and in the philosophy of language, the problem of the arbitrary is intrinsic to the problem of representation. Chandler's extended meditation on the "tension between the 'representative' and the 'representational'" and on the "representative state" in *England in 1819* demonstrates how complexly entangled the apparently distinct discourses of the arbitrary become in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From Marx's distinction between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and from Gayatri Spivak's elaboration of this distinction in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Chandler draws out the double problematic as it applies to the development of historical and historicizing discourse during the Romantic period: "discussion of literary representation or representativeness in this period often intersects with the dominant political topic of the day: the issue of reform in political representation" (187).³² I want to situate this intersection even more intensively at the theoretical and practical level of verbal representation itself. The problem of the arbitrary occupies multiple levels of representation simultaneously, as Chandler indicates in observing that "Hazlitt's couching of his comments [in *The Spirit of the Age*] about literary popularity in the terms of political suffrage is . . . by no means an arbitrary metaphor" (187).

Moving Chandler's analysis further onto the plane of linguistic theory

and stylistic practice will enable us to deepen our sense of why and how his account of Romantic literary culture in general, and of Romantic historicism in particular, matters to our reading of individual texts. Chandler's own reading of the poem from which he takes his title, Shelley's "England in 1819," stands as a kind of proleptic response to the imagined challenge that he has appropriated Shelley's title for "an arbitrarily framed subject matter" (23) and begins to suggest ways in which the language of Shelley's sonnet is itself "arbitrarily framed." The rhetorical and grammatical structure of the poem, Chandler implies, enacts an arbitrary compositional power that may seem willful and coercive in its framing of a historical situation in which despotism produces hope: "The grammatical device by which this transformation is accomplished could scarcely be more overt: the sheer predication ('Are graves') that at once turns the catalogue into a compound subject and reduces its items to a common fate" (24). In the closing couplet "Shelley makes a historical turning point appear to coincide with the formal turning point of the poem" (27). Yet at the same time, Chandler says, this "formal turning point occurs in a scrambled sequence of rhymes"—in a stylistic trajectory that would appear, on his reading, to move us in the opposite direction of the arbitrary understood as the capricious, the random. But is the rhyme sequence scrambled? *a b a b a b c d c d c c d d* is a willfully unscrambled though decidedly unconventional formal order, one that depends, as all rhyme sequences do, on the accidents or contingencies that generate "King" / "spring" / "cling," "flow" / "know" / "blow," "field" / "wield" / "sealed" / "unrepealed," and "prey" / "slay" / "may" / "day." It is the shaping of such contingencies through and across the conventions of sonnet form into a single sentence whose copulative grammar completes itself in "Are graves" at the beginning of the penultimate line, only to open out into the liberatory but indeterminate future possibility stretched across the line-ending of the couplet—"may / Burst, to illumine"—it is this stylistic action, I think, that makes "England in 1819" what Chandler calls "a project of making history by making it legible" (78). Shelley's stylistic making engages all senses of arbitrary linguistic power, and it does so in ways that represent the contradictions of arbitrary social and political power as well.

We are now in a better position to take the measure of de Man's dark pronouncement in "Shelley Disfigured": "The positing power of language is both entirely arbitrary in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it. It stands beyond the polarities of chance and determination and can therefore not be part of a temporal sequence of events." The "positing power of language" can be grasped dialectically only *within* "the polarities of chance and determination," and as part of a sequence that is at

once “temporal” and a matter of grammatical necessity. Being subject to chance and to temporality, the force of language cannot indeed be entirely “reduced to necessity,” but neither can it be produced or received except in relation to binding rules of meaningful, communicable thought. What de Man provokes us negatively to see about Shelley’s figuring of the power and the limits of language in *The Triumph of Life* is a registering of cultural and political history. Language is one of the forms that cultural and political history takes; it is one of the forms of thought through which human beings make history.

“Human beings make their own history, but they make it not ‘out of free pieces’ [voluntarily, of their own accord]—not under self-chosen, but under immediately found, given, and transmitted, circumstances.”³³ Marx’s famous sentence from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* generates interpretive resources that have too often gone unrealized in literary and cultural criticism that quotes it. In Shelley’s “England in 1819,” the “circumstances” of sonnet form, no less than the “circumstances” of Regency state corruption and oppression, are “found, given and transmitted” from the past, and it is from both that Shelley makes history poetically, in Chandler’s terms, “by making it legible.” Chandler gets to the nub of what it means to “make history” when he says that “to see how [Marx’s] formulation sets the terms for the debate about the historian’s code is to see how the question at issue relates to the vexed issue of determination” (36). Whether as a question of the “general will” of the polis or of the individual will of a political agent or writer, “determination” structures nineteenth-century efforts to understand the constitution of society and culture. The problem of the arbitrary is, as I suggested earlier, one form of the problem of determination (and, from an Althusserian perspective, of overdetermination)³⁴—the setting of ends or limits, the bringing about of results, the exerting of specific pressures, the willing of particular ends, limits, or results. Understanding the problem of determination, in all of these senses, by attending critically to the discourse of the arbitrary enables us to see more precisely how this problem inheres in language itself as semiotic and grammatical system and as social and historical institution. Romantic writing finds, in the circumstances given to it and transmitted by it during the great revolutionary crises of modern Europe before the twentieth century, its historically distinctive relation to forces that were and still are contradictorily called “arbitrary.” Often it denies or ironically submits to these forces. Occasionally it imagines not an organicist or theological escape from the arbitrary but a transformation of privileged will and privileged caprice, necessity and chance, the causal and the casual, into new, less destructive, more commonly productive forms of discourse and social life.