CHAPTER I

Introduction: Universal Empire

> The greater part of the world has, properly speaking, no history, because the despotism of custom is complete.
> This is the case over the whole East.
>
> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

I

The Hindu legends still present a maze of unnatural fictions, in which a series of real events can by no artifice be traced. The internal evidence which these legends display, afforded indeed, from the beginning, the strongest reason to anticipate this result. The offspring of a wild and ungoverned imagination, they mark the state of a rude and credulous people, whom the marvellous delights; who cannot estimate the use of a record of past events; and whose imagination the real occurrences of life are too familiar to engage. To the monstrous period of years which the legends of the Hindus involve, they ascribe events the most extravagant and unnatural: events not even connected in chronological series; a number of independent and incredible fictions. This people, indeed, are perfectly destitute of historical records.[1]

James Mill's assessment of India's past in the opening pages of his *History of British India* (1817–36) establishes the context for the arrival of his own historicizing project and of the larger civilizing mission undertaken by the East India Company. To set to rights the chaos of India's past, and to connect factual events into a diachronic story within a rational, logical, and, above all, historical narrative: this is evidently a significant component of Mill's effort to bring history not only to British India, but to all of India (both geographically and temporally). If, he argues, the "wildness and inconsistency of the Hindu statements evidently place them beyond the sober limits of truth and history," then what is required to bring governance to the hitherto ungovernable is precisely the imposition of those very limits. Part of Mill's mission, then, is to distinguish fiction from truth, myth from reality, and unreal time from

historical time, in order to supply this people without history with properly historical records, records whose epistemological foundation will rest upon a lattice-work of such dualisms. Another part of his mission, though, is to help Britain and the East India Company absorb contemporary India into the narrative of a universal history – the world history of modernization – thereby retroactively historicizing India's unruly past even as its present is brought under increasing control and order.

Thus assimilated, India and its past would exhibit the sort of order that defines the universal conception of history informing Mill's voluminous text – a conception of history that had only begun to emerge in his own lifetime, and that was still in the process of development when he sat down to write what was, he claims, the first true history of India. Mill's conception of history claims for itself the privilege not only of uniqueness, but of universal truth; for it allows itself to be thought and written only in its own sequential terms and only according to the dictates of its own units of abstract modern time. According to Mill's conception, not only was there no prior history; there was above all no prior *world history* in terms of which all other histories could be brought together and rendered meaningful.

Mill's project entails, then, the retroactive rewriting of all previous histories in terms of the narrative of the universal world history to which he claims to belong, as well as the projection of that narrative into his own time and on into the future (a future of its own making). The historical narrative into which Mill is eager to incorporate India is not so much that of British imperialism or that of capitalism, but rather the narrative of their joint transfiguration by, and convergence in, the process of modernization.[2] Paradoxically, however, the sudden appearance of such a narrative of modernization as world history anticipates the actual (and much more gradual) convergence of capitalist and imperialist practices within the process of modernization. In fact, during Mill's lifetime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – a span commonly though not unproblematically referred to in British literary history as the romantic period – these practices had only just begun to merge and become inseparable, and at the same time *potentially* or *tendentially* global in reach.[3]

The global reach of these processes thus appears in virtual form long before it is materially consolidated in political and economic terms; in other words, the dreams of this unified world-system appear in narrative form long before it has consolidated itself and become a cultural domi-

nant.[4] At the same time, we can also chart the simultaneous emergence of a number of *anti-histories* of this process, that is, a body of efforts to anticipate, understand, and contest these historical developments before they have actually taken place. Such anti-histories – including the one that I would argue is the earliest and most comprehensive, namely William Blake's prophecies of Universal Empire – share in common with Mill's sense of history the fact that they are anticipating a development that has not yet taken place. With this key difference: that, rather than seeking to facilitate that development, they seek to contest it.

Ironically, both the histories and anti-histories of the world-system in the early nineteenth century have the status of prophecy. However, the primary orientation of these prophecies is not the future, but rather the present in which they were produced. They are prophecies not in the usual sense, but rather in the more restricted Blakean sense. They are concerned above all with their own time, with historical and material developments that already exist, as well as possible (and impossible) future developments – including the emergence of a single dominant world-system.[5] In his form of prophecy, Mill envisages a future and a past both understood in the seamless terms of his own present: a homogenization not only of time but of all history, in which virtually everything could be made to conform and make sense (and that which could not, for example, much of the Indian history of India, would be dismissed as fantasy or impossibility or outright falsehood).

For someone like Blake, on the other hand, historical experience and time itself are never homogeneous, and one of the purposes of his kind of anti-history is to seek out the heterogeneous and the unexpected in the present, as well as to imagine the unimaginable projected into any number of possible (or impossible) futures. "Historians," he writes, "being weakly organiz'd themselves, cannot see either miracle or prodigy; all is to them a dull round of probabilities & possibilities; but the history of all times & places, is nothing else but improbabilities and impossibilities; what we should say, was impossible if we did not see it always before our eyes."[6] In Blake's oppositional form of prophecy, the present is simultaneously projected as a future and renarrated as a past, but in such a way that present, future, and past intermingle in an unresolved radical heterogeneity of time – the improbable and the impossible – which is precisely what sustains Blake's kind of prophetic vision.

Thus, the very beginning of the gradual convergence of imperialist and capitalist practices in the process of modernization provided at once

the necessary and the sufficient conditions for the emergence of a new universal narrative of world history (projected both forward and backward according to the new understanding of homogeneous unilinear time that emerged with it) that is articulated in Mill's discussion of India.[7] But it also provided the conditions for the simultaneous emergence of a discontinuous constellation of attempts to resist, or to chart out alternatives to, its history – in romanticism. For it is a striking fact, which requires much further elaboration, that Mill launched his project as early as 1806, when the first generation of romantic poets was still in its prime (Wordsworth had just finished the first full draft of *The Prelude*, Southey had just published *Madoc*, Coleridge had not even contemplated the *Biographia*, Blake had just started work on *Jerusalem*) and the second generation still in its youth (Byron and Shelley had not yet published anything, and Keats, "the tadpole of the Lakes," as Byron would later call him, was not even a teenager).

The emergence of the new understanding of history was closely related to certain changes taking place at the time in British paradigms of empire and attitudes towards non-Europeans, which Mill's approach to India emblematizes. Moreover, this history, projected "forward," would henceforth be governed not only by the principles of rationality and diachrony championed by Mill, but by the ebbs and flows of the capitalist mode of production and system of exchange (both of which were undergoing momentous transformations during this period), and hence by the pulses and rhythms of what Fernand Braudel refers to as "world-time."[8] This history would, furthermore, be narrated and controlled by the most modern, most advanced, most "civilized" people in the most developed societies – those farthest ahead in what Johannes Fabian has elaborated as the stream of evolutionary Time – who, like Mill, who would claim history as their own possession in their confrontations with cultures and peoples without history.[9]

According to this view, such peoples were making the uneasy transition from a wretched state of static pre-modernity to the beginning of their apprenticeship in modernization, in which their social, cultural, and economic practices would be transformed and recoded in the transition not only from past to history, but also from custom to law;[10] from communal, clan, tribal, or despotic forms of property to private property;[11] from heterogeneous and irregular ("casual") forms of labor to the rigors of a wage economy;[12] from customary forms of payment and compensation to the strictly monetary remuneration of the hourly wage;[13] from archaic, seasonal, irregular temporal practices to the

regular practice of modern clock-time;[14] from barter economies or trades-in-kind to a more strictly measurable monetary system of exchange ruled by principles of computational equivalence;[15] from highly skilled artisanal craftsmanship to an increasingly automated system of production relying only on that flow of quantified and regulated energy-in-time that would eventually come to be called "unskilled labor" but that was first broken down in William Petty's "political arithmetick" into a stream of labor-power that could (ideally) be smoothly distributed across a highly diversified production process, subject only to the forms of resistance that this appropriation of energy might encounter from the possessors of labor-power themselves;[16] from all kinds of political systems to the modern liberal democracy that would eventually (if we follow this logic to its ultimate conclusion) preside over the "end of history" about which we have heard so much in recent years.[17]

II

Britain's transition into a social formation dominated by the culture of modernization was not defined by one cataclysmic event. Rather, this process took several decades to emerge – the decades identified as the romantic period in Britain – and it took several more decades for this new cultural dominant to consolidate itself. Economically, the romantic period in Britain marked a shift from the primacy of trade and commerce towards the primacy of industrial production, and hence towards a properly modern mode of capitalism (albeit one that at the time often took only an embryonic form).[18] Politically, the period marked a rupture in paradigms and policies of imperial power, and a shift in the locus of intense imperial activity from the western to the eastern hemispheres, as well as a dramatic intensification in the exercise of state power in response to the revolutionary situation within Britain itself.[19]

However, neither the political nor the economic transition, taken on its own, can account for the overall *cultural* change that was taking place in this period. This overall change in attitudes, perspectives, relations, knowledges, and practices can be located in both material and discursive forms (including economic and political practices, to be sure, but not restricted to them). In fact, this change reminds us of the extent to which discourse – and culture – are material processes. Modernization must be understood from the very beginning as an overall cultural development, and not merely as a socio-economic process from which

we might only in a secondary sense abstract either a free-floating or a superstructural notion of cultural "modernity."[20]

However, the varied engagements with the culture of modernization in Britain that we may identify as romanticism primarily took the form of an engagement not with modernization *tout court* or as such, but rather with its social, economic, and political manifestations. These in turn were grasped through their effects rather than systemically: in urbanization, for example; or the advent of machine-production; or imperial conquest; or the transformation of the countryside; or the degradation of the natural environment; or the anomie and alienation of the monad – the individual human subject cut adrift in the modern world – which inspired Keats's most passionate and disturbing Odes.

Let us consider a classic example of the often astonishing sweep of romanticism's critique of modernization. In his haunting poem, *Michael*, Wordsworth ties together (to name only a few issues brought up in the poem) the Enclosure movement; the newly significant question of debt; the development of a modern urban culture of dissolution and apparent degeneration; the erosion and destruction of traditional forms of family and social production; the possibilities opened up by emigration to the colonies; the transformation of agriculture; the emergence of a new way of thinking and experiencing time; and a new modern sense of national, as opposed to local, culture, custom, identity. It is not evident that Wordsworth thought of all these questions (which we today would readily identify as aspects of modernization) as related to one another in an overall or systematic way. But – sensitive and perceptive as he was – he was quite obviously, even if only intuitively, aware of the fact that they had something to do with each other, and were collectively to be identified as part of a "multitude of causes, unknown to former times," for which Wordsworth lacked only the systemic label that we are now in a position to supply with the benefit of hindsight.

I will argue this point at greater length in the chapters that follow, but for now I want to suggest that romanticism can be partly understood as a diverse and heterogeneous series of engagements with modernization (which here may be seen as a cause that is immanent in its effects and really has no other existence). It can also be understood as a mediating discourse, through which the multitudinous political and economic facets of modernization, many of which are mapped out in *Michael*, are related to each other to a greater or lesser extent, situated as parts of an overall cultural transformation. Romanticism was not merely a response to this transformation. It was a key constitutive element: as much as any

other material development, this series of engagements contributed to the constitution of modernization as a cultural field that would eventually rise to dominance (notwithstanding this romantic critique that would accompany it to the bitter end).

We are now in a position to see that the staggering heterogeneity of romanticism was directly related to the heterogeneity of the processes of modernization. Thus, my task in this book will not be to produce a single key to "unlock" or explain the huge variety of literary and cultural output during the romantic period; such a task would in any case be not only impossible, but unnecessary. For what I am saying here is that romanticism must not be understood as a movement, a school, a style, or even a tendency. I therefore heed Marilyn Butler's warning – not the first, but one of the most persuasively argued – that we could never generate such a cohesive identity for romanticism, into which we might then insert various authors or texts.[21] "'Romanticism,' Butler writes, "is inchoate because it is not a single intellectual movement but a complex of responses to certain conditions which Western society has experienced and continues to experience since the middle of the eighteenth century."[22] I would like to follow Butler's lead and further specify the nature of this "complex of responses," and also to suggest that romanticism was never simply a "response," but a key constitutive element in those transformations.

For we, at least, *can* identify those "certain conditions" as various aspects of one overall cultural development, as signifying the emergence of the culture of modernization. If "romanticism" can make any sense as a term, then, it would have to be not as a label identifying a particular style, theme, or form, let alone a school or movement. It would have to serve as the historical designation of a number of enormously varied engagements with the multitudinous discourses of modernization, which took place in a staggering number of forms, styles, genres, and which can be linked together only in terms of that engagement and in such a way that their individual and unique traits and characteristics are respected and not meaninglessly collapsed into each other.

Such romantic engagements were dialectically bound up with modernization, and contributed to its development as a cultural dominant. In different forms, they can always be found wherever the culture of modernization is found, whether dominant, residual or emergent, in the West and in the non-West alike.[23] Strictly speaking, this is not exactly a periodizing hypothesis, except insofar as the romantic period in Britain itself marks the moment of the emergence of the culture of moderniz-

ation, and hence of that whole new way of thinking of periods and periodizing and historical change that was articulated for the first time in British romanticism.[24]

While by the end of the nineteenth century the sense of world history and world-time invoked by Mill would gradually rise to cultural dominance, diffuse through and finally pervade virtually all aspects of cultural production and activity (commerce, trade, politics, exploration, as well as literary production), literature, and even more specifically poetry, emerged during the romantic period as a privileged site for the exploration of alternatives to modernization, or the celebration of anti-modern exoticism that we can see at work, for example, in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*. Later nineteenth-century modes of understanding anti-modern otherness would rely on a different kind of epistemology, a different kind of language, and above all different ways of conceiving temporality. And while literature would retain its importance as a field for the representation and articulation of cultural identity and difference (usually but not always in the service of empire), the emphasis would increasingly shift to the novel and particularly the realist novel of development.

Of course, the nineteenth-century realist novel is the genre on which much of the most important critical work on the relationship between literature, on the one hand, and capitalism and imperialism on the other, has been focused – in, for example, the work of Patrick Brantlinger, Sara Suleri, Jonathan Arac, Christopher Miller, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said. One of the aims of the present study, then, is to shift the emphasis to an earlier period and a different genre, in order to expand more fully our understanding of these relationships by examining them in an unstable and even explosively transitional moment.

"Most historians of empire," writes Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, "speak of the 'age of empire' as formally beginning around 1878, with the 'scramble for Africa.' A closer look at the cultural actuality reveals a much earlier, more deeply and stubbornly held view about overseas European hegemony; we can locate a coherent, fully mobilized system of ideas near the end of the eighteenth century, and there follows the set of integral developments such as the first great systematic conquests under Napoleon, the rise of nationalism and the European nation-state, the advent of large-scale industrialization, and the consolidation of power in the bourgeoisie."[25] Said argues that a pattern of cultural attitudes (or structures of feeling) corresponding to this set of developments emerged alongside and accompanied the elaboration of

imperial rule well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This pattern was characterized by virtually unanimous support of imperialism and a striking lack of dissent. One of the main forms of expression of this pattern of cultural validation of imperialism was the novel. The history of the novel may be understood in Said's terms as the history of imperialism itself, since "imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible . . . to read one without in some way dealing with the other."[26]

According to Said, only in the climax of the "age of empire" in the 1890s, when the realist novel enters its modernist crisis, can we begin to find a sustained pattern of anti-imperial criticism within the realm of (metropolitan) literary production, a pattern that formed a significant component of the modernist breakdown of the realist novel.[27] Thus, although Said admits that the cultural ideology of imperialism never enjoys absolute dominance within, for example, British literature, he wants to argue that the main forms of cultural opposition to imperialism within the metropolis itself came only towards the end, when its vision had largely been consolidated in the decades around the First World War; so that, until then, he says that we can speak of a *largely* if not *completely* "unopposed and undeterred will to overseas dominion."[28]

However, I would argue that the romantic period in Britain marks the earliest sustained (though largely doomed) attempt to articulate a form of opposition to the culture of modernization – including but not limited to imperialism – from its very beginnings. Once it is reinterpreted as I propose, the often remarked aesthetic covergences and parallels between romanticism and modernism can be explained in a new way. Because of the complex and shifting engagement between literary production and the practice and experience of modernization, modernist literary experiments, arising partly out of the perceived exhaustion of the realist novel and especially the *Bildungsroman* by the early twentieth century, would return to and elaborate an earlier romantic obsession with fractured, disjointed, and disruptive temporalities, both in poetry and in prose.[29]

For romanticism appears alongside the emergence of modernization and helps to define it culturally from its very beginnings; a process that helps us to explain what makes the romantic period in Britain identifiable as a period. Modernism, on the other hand – though precisely like romanticism a discourse of unevenness, and also in many of its varieties a critique of the modern – emerges as the culture of modernization reaches its fullest development and is on the point of absorbing or

wiping out the last vestiges of the pre-modern and the archaic in a rapidly modernizing society.[30] The distinction between modernism and romanticism, however, lies not so much in their engagements with modernization (for they sometimes look uncannily similar in this regard, though one would probably be going too far to say, "first time as tragedy, second time as farce"), but rather in that romanticism emerges with the beginnings of modernization and persists alongside it to the end; whereas modernism emerges specifically at the climax of that process and helps to constitute that climax in overall cultural terms. In other words, the difference between romanticism and modernism lies in the extent to which we can understand them as periodizing hypotheses; or, rather, in the extent *to which they enable us to understand the process of periodizing to begin with* (for otherwise modernism might just look like nothing but a return to romanticism, albeit in a new and more intense form because of its specific cultural and historical situatedness). Whereas modernism, in many of its varieties, celebrates the pre- or anti-modern and the archaic as they are on the verge of final eradication or commodification, romanticism celebrates the pre- or anti-modern at the moment at which that eradication is just beginning. Such celebrations are not unique to Britain, and can be located wherever the process of modernization comes into contact with "traditional" cultures and ways of life; it is in this sense that romanticism marks the inception of a new culture of modernization, of which the late twentieth-century phenomenon of globalization appears as the climax.

III

Indeed, a certain fascination or even obsession with the pre- or anti-modern (Nature, the colonial realm, the Orient) occupied the very center of the British romantic critique of modernization. This involved above all a new mode of understanding such anti-modern otherness precisely because of its historical and political relationship to the emerging culture of modernization.

Even for someone writing (and voyaging) as late as Lord Byron, it was still possible to think of the Orient, for example, not only as geographically distinct from Europe, but also as temporally and historically unique. As I shall show in chapter 5, for the Byron of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* (1812), the Orient was defined and structured by its own sense of temporality and its own sense of history, rather than merely constituting, as it clearly already did for Mill, a subordinate element in a