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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Being There, circa 1824

In 1824, the anonymous narrator of a book entitled *Revelations of the Dead-Alive* claims to have travelled two hundred years into the future to experience life in London during the year 2023. He relates what he learned from conversations with twenty-first-century writers, artists, and scientists, and from his research in the twenty-first-century British Library, about how the history of his own century was recorded. Satirizing the literature, theatre, art, science, politics, and fashions of 1820s Britain from the imagined vantage point of 2023, *Revelations* speculates about a possible future.

This bizarre text by Irish novelist and journalist John Banim at once describes and performs many of the distinctive features of the milieu from which it arose. Banim surveys the metropolitan landscape of 1820s London, with its intertwined industries of theatre and publishing. He identifies technological innovation and financial speculation as pre-eminent trends of his time, and he finds the transatlantic speculations of the 1820s mirrored in the imagined world of 2023 by "cargoes of speculators" who emigrate by "balloon-ship" to establish colonies on the moon.[1] Meanwhile, Banim himself writes in a speculative mode: *Revelations of the Dead-Alive* is an early example of speculative fiction about the future – at least to the extent that it can be classified as fiction, because its genre, also typically for the 1820s, fluctuates between imaginative tale and journalistic essay. Fact and fiction, in the form of science and fantasy, blend into one another in the frame narrative of *Revelations*, where the narrator explains how he trained his body to remain for long periods of time in a comatose "dead-alive" state of the kind verifiably documented in early-nineteenth-century medical literature; improvising wildly on contemporary medicine, he imagines that during this state his consciousness can travel into the future. In an offbeat manner, Banim thereby invokes another characteristic theme of the 1820s: the nature of personal identity and its continuity over time.

Identity, speculation, experiment, the interweaving of fact with fiction and print with performance: if we could reverse Banim's perspective and be

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there in 1824, we would find a culture distinctively shaped by those themes and practices. That is the hypothesis to be explored in the present book, which – time travel not being an option – undertakes, in James Chandler's words, "an effort to read texts in representative relation to the dated historical situation in which they were produced and once consumed."[2] Like *Revelations of the Dead-Alive*, the texts and performances discussed in this book are notable for being produced at near-improvisational speed, in immediate response to the events of their time. They therefore prompt a critical approach oriented toward cultural history and what William Hazlitt termed the "Spirit of the Age," in the essays he published under that title in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1824. Along with other "spirit of the age" writings published between 1819 and 1831, Hazlitt's essays demonstrate that the mode of historicist research that seeks to identify the characteristic features of an era originates in Romanticism itself, which Chandler calls "the age of the spirit of the age – that is, the period when the normative status of the period becomes a central and self-conscious aspect of historical reflection."[3] My account of the literary-cultural field of the 1820s is inspired by this notion of self-conscious reflection on characteristic features and by the particularly effervescent year of Hazlitt's essays, 1824, as a representative time span that also marks the crux of a volatile decade.[4]

I begin, then, with a synopsis of 1824 – a "hot chronology" of intense literary-cultural activity within a short stretch of historical time. Typically for the 1820s, periodical literature and visual spectacles played a dominant role in the cultural marketplace throughout the year. In January, the quarterly *Westminster Review* began publication for what would be an almost century-long run; among other periodicals founded in 1824 were the *Metropolitan Literary Journal*, the *Monthly Critical Gazette*, the *Literary Magnet*, the *World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons*, *Pierce Egan's Life in London, and Sporting Guide*, and, in Paris, the influential feuilleton *Le Globe*. In February, Byron's unfinished drama about identity-switching, *The Deformed Transformed*, was published, and in March the last completed cantos of his *Don Juan* appeared. Meanwhile, John Hunt stood trial for seditious libel for having published Byron's *Vision of Judgment* in *The Liberal* a year and a half earlier. In April 1824, Lord Byron died; in July his body was brought back from Greece to England for two weeks of public funeral rites and burial in Nottinghamshire. On 19 April, the day of Byron's death at Missolonghi, a new theatrical spectacle on an already overrepresented subject, *The Battle of Waterloo*, opened at Astley's Amphitheatre in London, joining a new panorama depicting the same event for spectators at Spring Gardens. Simultaneously, in that same week,

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two innovative performers gave popular one-man shows in European capitals: in London, the comic actor Charles Mathews offered extravaganza evenings of character impersonations on the theme *A Trip to America*, and, in Paris, the Italian *improvvisatore* Tommaso Sgricci caused a sensation by performing completely extemporized full-length tragedies in packed theatres. Two equally popular though very different series of short fiction were launched in 1824: the rural sketches collected under the title *Our Village* by Mary Russell Mitford and the fashionable tales by Theodore Hook entitled *Sayings and Doings*; these volumes would later be credited with establishing the genres of the idyll and silver-fork fiction, respectively. Fans of the still officially anonymous "Author of Waverley" had two new triple-decker novels from his pen to read in 1824, *Saint Ronan's Well* and *Redgauntlet*. In German towns a third new novel purporting to be by Walter Scott, entitled *Walladmor*, hit the market in German translation – only it was not a translation but a forgery. Thomas De Quincey exposed it as such in the *London Magazine* in October, and he went on to publish a semi-satirical "retranslation" of *Walladmor* from German into English before the year was over. Three other anonymous publications round out the variegated literary field of 1824: Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* fed the mystique surrounding the poet known only as "L. E. L."; Thomas Moore's *Memoirs of Captain Rock* advocated Irish nationalism and Catholic emancipation; and James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, although a poor seller, exemplified the experimental nature of contemporary fiction with its synthesis of gothic, historical, psychological, supernatural, and metafictional elements.

The year 1824 also brought memorable musical premieres and innovations in the visual arts. The celebrated Gioachino Rossini made a London debut as conductor of his opera *Zelmira* in January, beginning a half-year visit to Britain together with his wife, the singer Isabella Colbran; Beethoven's Ninth Symphony debuted in Vienna on 7 May; twelve-year-old virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt gave his first performances in Paris and later in London. John Arrowsmith took out a patent for the diorama, a more dramatic variant of the panorama that used changes in lighting to create the illusion of depth and movement; dioramas of Brest and Chartres Cathedral were exhibited in London in 1824. The Athenaeum Club for men of scientific, literary, and artistic achievement was founded that year, and Britain's National Gallery opened to the public on 10 May. Kamehameha II, King of Hawaii, and his wife, the Queen Consort Kamāmalu, attended theatrical performances at Covent Garden and

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Drury Lane while on a state visit, but both of them tragically fell ill with measles and died in London in July.

Beyond the literary-cultural sphere, the year 1824 saw the passage of the Vagrancy Act, which prohibited begging in England and Wales, and the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Meanwhile, the British stock market soared on investment mania. Scottish economist John Ramsay McCulloch began to give public lectures on political economy in London and elsewhere; the size of his audiences, and the influential public leaders among them, demonstrated increasingly broad interest in this new social science. On the European continent, Louis XVIII of France died and was succeeded by his reactionary brother, Charles X, and the Carlsbad Decrees that placed restrictions on free expression in the press and universities were renewed and made permanent in the German states. In Britain's colonial regions, the Canada Company was formed to sell Crown lands and promote settlement in what is now the province of Ontario; "Australia" was declared the official name of the territory that had been known as "New Holland"; Singapore became a British colony; and the first Anglo-Burmese War began. Scientific advances included the initial formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which demonstrates that there is a maximum limit to the efficiency of any heat engine and has as its corollary the irreversibility of time and natural processes. Other products of 1824, material and abstract, are the British imperial system of measurement, established by the passage of the Weights and Measures Act; discoveries and inventions leading to the electromagnet, non-Euclidean geometry, the Braille alphabet, and Portland cement; the launch of Cadbury's chocolate, Colby cheese, Glenlivet whisky, and the first commercial pasta factory in Italy; and the adoption of the calorie as a unit of energy.

In literary history, 1824 often marks endings and beginnings. John O. Hayden chose 1824 as the end point for his anthology *The Romantic Reviewers, 1802–1824*, citing William Gifford's retirement as editor of the *Quarterly Review* and, more importantly, the death of Byron – which Hayden takes as a sign that "[b]y 1824 the astonishing creativity of the Romantic age was at an end."[5] Scholars of literature and economics have correlated Byron's death with the shift from the market dominance of poetry to that of prose fiction; Lee Erickson's observation that "John Murray refused any manuscripts of poetry after Byron's death in 1824"[6] is cited and extended by Mary Poovey, who discusses "the fall in the market value of poetry after 1824."[7] Conversely, 1824 is treated as the de facto start of the Victorian period by Lawrence Poston in an essay on nineteenth-

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century periodization, where he cites two further works that adopt 1824 as their starting point: Richard Cronin's *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–1840* and the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*.[8] The *Wellesley Index* specifically references the founding of the *Westminster Review* as its reason to begin with 1824; in addition, the editors describe this moment as a conceptual turning point: "An initial date in the mid-twenties was chosen because the age seems to begin with the recognition . . . that radical changes in politics and religion were on the horizon."[9]

Backdating the Victorian period so that it abuts Romanticism in 1824 is an interesting thought experiment, but it elides the distinctiveness of literary culture during the decade of George IV's reign as much as does the long-standing tendency to associate the 1820s with a weak and watered-down variety of Romanticism. Literary historians traditionally disparaged the years after the (literal or spiritual) death of the great Romantic poets as a transitional period that could come up with little more than ephemera, clichéd melodrama, superficial silver-fork fiction, and the sentimental poetry that filled gift-books and annuals. In English departments, this era falls victim to institutional structures organized along Romantic and Victorian lines. The post-1820 years have been described as "a no-man's land that no one is fighting for"[10] and "an embarrassment to the historian of English literature."[11] In German literary history, the 1820s and 1830s have generally been regarded as the dying days of *Klassik* and *Romantik* when writers produced the minor, domestic, conservative forms that the (usually derogatory) term *Biedermeier* was coined to describe. In the most expansive development of this viewpoint, Virgil Nemoianu's *The Taming of Romanticism* and its sequel *The Triumph of Imperfection* analyze the period 1815–48 across Europe as a Biedermeier culture of "low romanticism" and "toned-down romanticism."[12] Musicologist Harvey Sachs adopts a similar Continental perspective in his book *The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824*, where he finds in the art of Beethoven, Byron, Pushkin, Delacroix, Stendhal, and Heine a common chord of "discontent over the return of antiliberalism as a guiding principle and over the restoration of regimes that rejected the gains made not only by the Revolution but even by its predecessor, the Enlightenment."[13] Sachs's thick description of 1824 echoes Nemoianu's account of the 1820s as a period of stasis – if not, indeed, the negation of a period, an era in which what had seemed to be period-defining achievements were undone or shown to be illusory.

Yet Nemoianu's "toned-down romanticism" and Sachs's retrograde movement are challenged by the breathtaking changes that took place

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during the 1820s in technology, economics, and transportation, accelerating the spread of information and multiplying the media of communication. Periodicals and reading material in different price ranges proliferated, as did the performances, spectacles, and exhibitions available especially to a metropolitan public. As the steam-powered press, stereotype printing, and mechanized paper production accelerated the speed of production and increased the amount of printed matter in circulation, post-war prosperity and the ascendance of the urban middle and professional classes had dramatic effects on habits of consumerism in London, Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin, and other centres with which British publishers were thoroughly networked. In the wake of groundbreaking research by Robert Darnton and William St Clair on book history, by Richard D. Altick on popular entertainment and the reading public, and by Jonathan Crary on visual culture, new work on textual and performance practices continues to enrich our understanding of the dynamic cultural environment of early-nineteenth-century Britain. A substantial critical literature has grown up around the multimedia formats that garnered attention during the 1820s: handsomely printed, illustrated, silk- or leather-bound annuals, scrapbooks, and albums; panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, and other varieties of visual-experiential entertainment; melodrama, burletta, harlequinade, and pantomime; public lectures, sermons, sporting events, circuses, exhibits, and museums.[14] Simon During characterizes this "period of in-betweenness in British history" by its fashions, bibliomania, hoaxes, advertising, lotteries, and more specifically financial preoccupations such as the bullion controversy, forgery, and national debt.[15] As economic factors influenced the form, content, and tone of literary and cultural productions ever more strongly, the need to understand these factors interested writers and the wider public to the extent that, as Philip Connell puts it, "political economy was *the* dominant mode of social analysis" in the early nineteenth century.[16]

Infusing literature and performance, this active, adaptive, and experimental climate makes the decade of the 1820s a key transitional age – yet regarding it as *only* a transitional age risks leaving the distinctiveness of its cultural productions unrecognized. As research into media history opens up approaches that highlight its technological, communicative, and consumeristic innovations, scholars have begun to think about whether and how the post-Waterloo era actually constitutes an "era." While Richard Cronin's *Romantic Victorians* (2002) consciously avoids any "period-defining theory,"[17] his later study *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (2010) builds a fascinating narrative about a distinctive post-

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Waterloo decade around the theme of conflicts, rivalries, and duels. Gregory Dart's *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810–1840* (2012) proposes that the decades encompassed by its title might be understood as a "Cockney moment."[18] The nicely ambivalent subtitle of David Stewart's study *The Form of Poetry in the 1820s and 1830s: A Period of Doubt* (2018) brings critics' doubts about the value of period concepts in general to bear on the specific doubts of poets during the 1820s and 1830s about "whether they might come to form a 'period'," while suggesting that those very doubts contribute to the era's characteristic profile.[19]

These critics are right to imply that it may not be possible or desirable to invent new period designations beyond "late-Romantic," "late-Georgian," and "the 1820s" – terms I use synonymously, although not quite interchangeably, in this book. ("Late-Romantic" is used when the relationship to Romantic forms and texts is most relevant; "late-Georgian" when the context concerns social history; "the 1820s" to refer generally to events and publications falling within those dates.) Nevertheless, my thesis is that the decade had a distinctive episteme, as Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* calls the principles underlying the organization of knowledge in a given culture, and that uncovering its episteme can lead to a better understanding of its significance. I propose, therefore, that the paradigmatic themes and characteristic vocabulary that emerge from a close study of the cultural productions of the 1820s reveal structuring principles that help us recognize the contours of the era's world view; recognizing that framework deepens our understanding of the texts themselves and their formative impact on readers and audiences. My preliminary outline of the events of 1824 delineates a historical moment shaped by volatile economic conditions and international relations, together with a cultural sphere oriented toward practices of exhibition, imitation, and consumption and increasingly dominated by periodicals and visual media. To use the terms I will develop in the remainder of this introductory chapter, the field of the 1820s offered a capacious and pervasive concept of performance, in relation to which multifaceted forms of improvisation, speculation, and identity construction were able to flourish.

1.1 Performance: The Media Concept of the 1820s

In Britain, the decade began with political unrest, economic recession, severe cold weather, and the epoch-defining death of the long-reigning George III. These conditions, described by Malcolm Chase in his study of the United Kingdom in 1820, were processed with

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a distinctly performative inflection in the theatre and in print.[20] The accession of George IV to the throne set a theatrical tone that pervaded public events themselves and aesthetic representations of them. The king's coronation in 1821, his very public attempt to divorce his wife Caroline by means of a bill in parliament, and his royal visit to Scotland in 1822 (itself stage-managed by Walter Scott) reverberated through re-enactments in a variety of media: plays and panoramas, a massive painting by George Hayter entitled *The Trial of Queen Caroline*, and John Galt's novels *The Ayrshire Legatees* and *The Gathering of the West*, to name a few examples. Further reviews of the original events and their spectacular or satirical re-enactments proliferated in periodicals that were quickly adapting to widespread demand for coverage of metropolitan culture. Equally notable is the era's self-consciousness about what we would now call social performativity. "Nine-tenths of human conduct, in a state of civilization, is mere acting," writes a "correspondent" (likely the editor John Thelwall himself) in the *Panoramic Miscellany* of April 1826; "What is all the intercourse of polished society, but acting? Its language, tone, dress, diet, feeling, thought, – aye, every thing is artificial."[21] A contributor to the *European Magazine* in January 1825 draws an explicit connection between theatrical entertainment and social performativity: "Never was the theatre in higher fashion than at the present moment . . . We not only often borrow our characters from the stage, making our whole life a scenic representation, but we take our companions, nay, even our wives, from the pupils of Thalia and Melpomene."[22] The writer, identified only as "An Elderly Gentleman,"[23] extrapolates on the prominence and diversity of performances available to a metropolitan public in the mid-1820s:

> Never had we more lovely women, nor more able and sensible actors; never a greater variety of style, the taste of the foreign and true British drama in our first theatres, with all the talent of the Continent, in every department of the vocal and instrumental; of the dance, the pantomime, and pageantry, in our opera house and winter theatres; together with the equestrian, gladiatorial, and the gymnasia of the ancients, on our summer and minor theatres; the vast addition of which, in numerical strength, evinces national wealth and prosperity . . . and afford[s] a bill of fare for every palate, whilst no expence is spared to delight the public[.][24]

While writers of the 1820s thus reflect explicitly on the performativity of their age and the diversity of what we would now call its entertainment media, modern theorists point out that the age itself lacked a "media

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concept." John Guillory's contention that the "concept of a medium of communication" did not emerge until much later in the nineteenth century[25] is generally shared by media historians, including the contributors to Clifford Siskin and William Warner's volume *This Is Enlightenment* (2010). As media-studies approaches are increasingly brought to bear on early-nineteenth-century literature, scholars such as Andrew Burkett nevertheless posit that there was at least an "embryonic Romantic-age concept of media."[26] Others have found the cognate term "mediality" congenial for exploring the properties of different forms of communication in earlier periods, without assuming that the periods themselves employed a modern concept of media. Thus David Wellbery finds a "presupposition of mediality" appropriate whatever the historical field, if mediality is understood as "the general condition within which, under specific circumstances, something like 'poetry' or 'literature' can take shape."[27]

Still, the absence of a media concept during the 1820s stands in striking contrast to the active and explicit reflection on modes of expression, communication, and representation that was taking place at the time. This disjunction raises the question of what may have filled the place of a media concept and how the presuppositions of the 1820s may have conditioned mediality differently from today. Given the striking frequency and flexibility with which the word "performance" was used during the early nineteenth century, might performance be considered the 1820s equivalent of a media concept? In Romantic-era usage, the idea of performance extends fluently to what we now call different media – to literature, music, visual art, architecture, fashion, and social self-presentation. This transmedial meaning of the word "performance," which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* was current from the mid-seventeenth to the late-nineteenth century, proliferates during the 1820s. A journalist or reviewer can idiomatically refer to the work being reviewed as a "performance" whether it is a drama, a novel, a volume of poetry, a sermon, an exhibit, or a painting, and such a reference may be laudatory, ironic, or quite neutral. To take a fairly typical example, during the first half of 1824 the *London Magazine* featured an item on the virtuoso "performance" of the young pianist Franz Liszt,[28] reviewed a painting at the annual Royal Academy exhibition as "a first-rate performance,"[29] dismissed an expensively published travel narrative as "a performance [that] amounts to nothing,"[30] critiqued a long-winded multi-volume description of Sicily as a "voluminous performance,"[31] and praised Schiller's treatise on *The History of the Revolt of the*

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Netherlands not only as a "performance" but (again transmedially) as a series of "living pictures."[32]

What are the implications of understanding performance as a media concept? In the preceding examples, the flexible use of the word "performance" evokes the processes of production and reception that surround aesthetic objects. Whatever the medium, calling the work a performance acknowledges it as an act of self-presentation on the part of its creator and assumes that the involvement of an audience is integral to this act. Performance as a media concept overlays the communicative function of an act of expression with a heightened awareness of its dramatic function as an event. By contrast, the term "medium" puts the emphasis on a precondition of distance that needs to be bridged and on the nature of the bridging function. "Without differentiation [there is] no mediality" (*[o]hne Differentialität keine Medialität*), Sybille Krämer affirms in her survey of the philosophical principles behind modern media theory, where she develops the fundamental idea of a medium as that which occupies a middle space and bridges distance or difference.[33] Elsewhere, Krämer examines the contemporary evolution of theories of mediality (*Medialität*) and performativity (*Performativität*) and finds an increasing convergence between them in recent years. Both performance and media instantiate evanescent, unrepeatable events that require reception or uptake; both involve what she calls "das in-Szene-setzende Wahrnehmbarmachen"[34] – loosely translated, an act of staging that renders phenomena perceptible. Krämer sums up the current state of mediality and performativity studies in terms of

> a development that proceeds from communication to perception, from a set of rules to a phenomenon, from saying to showing, from the universal sign to the unique utterance, from sociality to corporeality, from referentiality to indexicality, from the symbolic to the transgression of the symbolic.
>
> [*Es geht um eine Entwicklung, die von der Kommunikation zur Wahrnehmung, vom Regelwerk zum Phänomen, vom Sagen zum Zeigen, vom universalen Zeichentyp zur singulären Äußerung, von der Sozialität zur Körperlichkeit, von der Referentialität zur Indexikalität, vom Symbolischen zur Überschreitung des Symbolischen verläuft.*][35]

The notion of medium as performance also re-emerges today in relation to the digital media environment. N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, turns to the concept of performance to describe the "processual" quality involved in digital presentations of literary works, in view of the process that intervenes between the storage vehicle and the delivery or display of the text.[36] In these senses, the "performance concept" of the late-

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