From Wordsworth to QAnon:

Conspiracy Belief as a Neo-Romantic Ideology

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Introduction: Conspiracy Belief as a Neo-Romantic Ideology

> [C]onspiracy theorists actually believe in a conspiracy because that is more comforting. The truth of the world is that it is chaotic. The truth is, that it is not the Jewish banking conspiracy or the grey aliens or the 12-foot reptiloids from another dimension that is in control. The truth is far more frightening, nobody is in control. The world is rudderless. (Alan Moore, 00:54:01)

On January 6th, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. Although no definitive proof had been supplied to support "The Big Lie," as evidenced by the nearly sixty dismissed legal challenges to President Biden's victory, thousands attended the "Stop the Steal" rally. The different flags and shibboleths brandished by attendees indicate that many extremist viewpoints were represented at the event: among them white nationalists, anti-government militia groups, Christian fundamentalists, anti-vaxxers, and pro-gun activists. And although it would be inaccurate to claim that those who sought to prevent the peaceful transfer of power shared a uniform worldview, because "The Big Lie" was a major theme of the rally, it can be assumed that most (if not all) attendees believed that the 2020 election had been stolen. What inspired thousands of supporters to endure the gloomy 43-degree weather of January 6th, then, was a conspiracy theory. The zeal that drove thousands of attendees to storm the Capitol complex, and another 1,200 to enter the building, was fueled by a

conspiracy theory. Ultimately, it was not a hostile nation or terror cell that threatened US democracy on January 6th, but conspiracy theorists.

Despite the rightwing composition of the Jan 6th crowd, when conspiracy belief is placed in a larger intellectual and historical context, it often transcends political boundaries in the traditional sense of the American two-party system. In a 2006 article on a 9/11 "truther" convention, Phil Mole writes: "I noted that attendees seemed to come from each extreme of the political spectrum. There were representatives of the far right who decry any form of government authority, but there were also members of the far left waging a tireless campaign against the perceived evils of capitalism and imperialism" (40). Conspiracy theories, then, attract ideologically and culturally diverse audiences, feeding their paranoia, exploiting their sense of alienation, and radicalizing their worldviews. Therefore, it is not just partisan allegiances or identification with charismatic political leaders that determine whether people are susceptible to conspiracy-theory belief.

And yet, despite the diversity of conspiracy theorists, scholars continue to study the distinct factors – psychological and social – that cause conspiracy belief. One recent study (2022) suggests a relationship between religiosity and conspiracy belief (Frenken, et al, 12); another (2019) shows that attraction to right-wing authoritarianism is a predictor of both pro-establishment and anti-establishment conspiracy theories (Wood, et al, 165); while yet another (2012) suggests that belief in the paranormal predicts general conspiracy belief (Drinkwater, et al, 7). Other studies have attempted to understand conspiracy belief as a particular cognitive style, such as a study (2015) that demonstrates that schizotypy and delusional ideation were positive correlatives for conspiracy belief (Dagnall, et al, 1). Tomes could be written on these various theories. This thesis will argue, however, that the philosophical and epistemological

roots of conspiracy belief are influenced, in part, by the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the chapters that follow, I make the case that key aspects of what we, in retrospect, call "Romantic thought," including the privileging of intuition over strict rationality and the distrust more generally of institutional knowledge, are manifest in twenty-first-century conspiracy-theory culture, and that coming to terms with the neo-Romantic features of conspiracy belief – mapping its historical-intellectual foundations – will provide us with the critical tools we need to make sense of this troubling cultural phenomenon. This is not to say that if Romantic thinkers, Coleridge or Byron, were transported to modern times that they would wait with bated breath for the newest Q-Anon post, or even that conspiracy theorists are latter-day Romantics per se, only that uncanny psychological and intellectual similarities exist and deserve further scrutiny.

Generally, Romantic thinkers were interested in what could be achieved when one had an inward focus on the natural self and eschewed the reductive and callous nature of pure rationality; with a deeper connection to nature and one's spirit, there was potential, they believed, for a higher order of human to exist. Many believed that through the power of the imagination, one could obtain truth and a more precise perception of reality. Through intuition, one could reach a transcendence that allowed the inherent autonomy and virtuous nature of a human being to thrive. And all of this, many Romantics posited, was directed by the ubiquitous power of nature: from the sublime awe of the colossal and jutting mountain ranges and the infinite expanse of space to the inward and ethereal boundlessness of the soul. However, many scholars, including Jerome McGann, have acknowledged that a strict definition is problematic: "What we have come to call Romanticism in literature was a movement born in an era marked by radical sets of conflicts and contradictions. Later scholars and critics who have labored to

define and understand these phenomena have, not unexpectedly, turned up a mare's nest of problems" (17). As with all historical shifts of consciousness, attempting to understand the infinitely complex thread of human drives, desires, and influences is a byzantine process which tends to expose new enigmas. Yet, at its core, Romantic philosophers were pondering the complex implications of a changing Western world – an event that W.B. Yeats might call a "gyre." They responded to an intellectual culture that was becoming progressively more empirical, rational, and reductive, and many Romantics feared the negative effects that strict Enlightenment principles could have on an individual's mind and spirit. Although many Romantics shared similar beliefs, each exercised their convictions through personal and varying methods. Coleridge, for example, responded by searching for higher truths, not from outside objects, but through the power of intuition and imagination; Wordsworth aspired to the transcendence of the spirit through the sublime realities of existence; and others, like Byron, searched for individual meaning through a liminal existence within a vindictive society. Yet, despite the inward focus on natural intuition, many Romantics, such as Friedrich Schiller, found a solid standing between rationality and intuition, believing that only by counterbalancing the two could one transcend to a more perfect state of being. Romanticism, then, was not simply the fear of strict rationality, but an acknowledgement of a better human existence; an attempt to look inward to the depths of the soul and unearth the natural and inherent potential of humanity.

In the modern day, some scholars have suggested that "the current spirituality movement which arose in the 1970s is largely the product of a new Romantic movement which emerged in the 1960s" (Thomas, 398). Others, including Drummond Bone, have mapped the connections between Romanticism and postmodernism: "Byron's endings look postmodernist, his attitude to experience as art looks post-modern, and in contrast postmodernist endings substituting aesthetic

for metaphysical transcendence can look remarkably Romantic" (84). Paul Hamilton provides a more nuanced reading of the postmodern legacy of Romanticism: "A quotidian individuality, a varied relish for minute particulars often celebrated by Romantic writing, goes against the idea of sublimity, but it can be seen through postmodern eyes to be a consequence of the most thoroughgoing rationale provided for sublimity" (28). He goes on to note that "the postmodern championing of particulars undetermined by any rule exceeds its Romantic heritage but only as it reworks Romanticism to serve different historical uses" (28). Indeed, cultural critics routinely discover vestiges of Romanticism, neo-Romantic specters, in all sorts of contemporary phenomena. Take, for example, the following statement by musicologist Walter Simmons:

> [There was a] group of composers born between the years 1880 and 1930 whose work is primarily concerned with the evocation of mood, the depiction of drama—either abstract or referential—and the expression of emotion—personal, subjective emotion, in particular. Embracing many of the stylistic features of late nineteenth-century music, the Neo-Romantics may be viewed as the most conservative of the traditionalists. (9)

Thus, reverberations of Romantic thought can still be seen within many different aspects of modern-day culture.

Throughout the last decade, conspiracy belief has become increasingly more prevalent within society, especially within politics. In decades past, conspiracy theories were treated as eccentric and amusing pastimes, symptoms of the rich diversity of American counterculture. However, as society has witnessed the potential dangers of conspiracy belief, as demonstrated on January 6th, conspiracy belief cannot continue to be relegated to the fantastical realm of little

green aliens and shadowy men in black; it must be seen from a new vantage. With every imaginative and intuitive alternative historical explanation, every causal fortification built against the sublime implications of existence, and every rallying cry to the individual's superiority, conspiracy belief demonstrates its Romantic heritage. The Romantic imagination and intuition exist within conspiracy belief as a psychological foundation involved in developing new theories and in the preservation of faith for the belief system. The Romantic sublime, however, has unsettling implications for conspiracy theorists, and through its acknowledgement and relegation to the causal realm, conspiracy belief finds its own unique form of subliminal transcendence. Within all of this, the Romantic individual guides conspiracy belief's antagonistic relationship with society, allowing conspiracy theorists a prideful justification for their stigma, as well as systems of free-thought and status that define their war against institutional subjugation.

Through the course of this thesis, Romanticism and conspiracy belief will be examined with a temporally forward approach: the focus will be on conspiracy belief's similarities to Romanticism, and not the converse. Thus, conspiracy belief will be considered as an echo of Romanticism. And much like the diminishing auditory substance of an echo from its source, it must be acknowledged that, with the passage of time, much of the accord with Romanticism's teachings has faded from conspiracy belief. Indeed, because remnants of the psychological foundations of Romanticism still exist within society, an inquiry must be made into the implications of the discord between some of the disciplined Romantic ideals of the past and the largely subconscious neo-Romantic qualities of modern conspiracy belief: what are the effects of Coleridge's unheeded warnings regarding the unbridled imagination, what might subliminal transcendence look like to those unaware of Wordsworth's experimentation, and how might an intuitive individual – unaware of Emerson's grasp on the self – react to an increasingly

technocratic and domineering society? Although many of these questions will be explored, it is the similarities between the two movements that can teach us the most about conspiracy belief. Through this unprecedented and unconventional approach, conspiracy theorists can be seen through a more clear, compassionate, and humane lens. This potential deeper understanding can help us to understand that, although conspiracy belief may be built upon an emotional foundation, its focus on intuition over rationality is not without a historical and intellectual basis. The psychological patterns inherent within conspiracy belief, then, can be understood as a mitigation of some of the many existential fears that all people contemplate: autonomy, chaos, and morality.

CHAPTER ONE

The Romantic Imagination and Contemporary Conspiracy Belief

> Our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.
>
> –Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" (1821)

Before the Romantic-era thinkers redefined the Western concept of imagination within the human psyche and art, there were various theories of the imagination that had developed over several millennia. Arezou Zalipour explains that "[i]n the classical world, imagination was given an intermediary role between perception (senses) and thinking (thought) in relation to the soul, perception and memory" (198). Although there are brief allusions to the imagination in Longinus's *On The Sublime* regarding passion while creating poetry, before the Renaissance, the imagination was not considered a strong component in the creation of art (Zalipour, 198). During the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant considered the imagination an important tool in the creation of art. For example, Kant made a distinction between reproductive imagination and productive imagination. Kant explains: "Now, in so far as imagination is spontaneity, I sometimes call it also the productive imagination, and distinguish it from the reproductive, the synthesis of which

is subject entirely to empirical laws, those of association" (226). Respectively, the reproductive and productive imagination describe the act of recreation, such as drawing a tree, and the act of creating something that, although not technically existing within the real world, represents an amalgamation of the artist's learned knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, such as a fictional creature (Zalipour, 201). However, even though the Western imagination was increasingly associated with the creation of art in the early seventeenth century, it wasn't until the Romantic era that thinkers such as William Blake started to consider the imagination as an important faculty in understanding reality, and for Blake specifically, the imagination was predominant: "Blake hated the indefinite, rejected the numinous, and insisted on the primacy of the imagination" (Weiskel, 7). The Romantic imagination became an important vessel of truth for poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelly. It was not just part of the artistic process of manifesting truth in art and poetry, but the central and guiding force. And although centuries separate conspiracy belief and Romanticism, conspiracy theorists can be seen to use the imagination in very similar ways as some of the Romantics philosophers. Conspiracy belief uses the imagination as a dominating tool in the development, interpretation, and perpetuation of conspiracy theories. Much like the Romantics used their inherent senses to discern what they believed to be superior truth in an increasingly rational society, conspiracy belief has come to rely on the imagination to challenge the perceived dominance of technocratic institutions and culture. Essentially, conspiracy theorists use their imagination to see the truth of historical events and the true nature of human actions.

Inferences of conspiracy belief's imaginative proclivities are demonstrated in the minutiae of 9/11's bureaucratic aftermath. Before the 9/11 Commission Report was released in 2004, the US public – as well as much of the world – had been awaiting the results of the

commission's arduous study of the events leading up to the terrorist attack. Based on the commission's mostly public and exhaustive research, certain incredulous members of the public – the "truthers" – hoped that once and for all the world would not only know what happened during 9/11, but also why. The truther movement was an ever-expanding group of conspiracy theorists who believed that the publicly accepted explanation of 9/11 was, at worst, a coverup for an American government false-flag event, and, at best, a wildly inaccurate depiction of events. When the report finally released, the truthers' questions and fears were far from satisfied. In fact, based on the explanations within the report, "truthers" were only further convinced that 9/11 was a government coverup. When the official report was released, there were little more than footnotes devoted to some of the truthers' imaginative conspiracy theories. As Mark Fenster notes, truthers believed that the 9/11 Commission was thinking too small, that the commission wasn't willing to expand their investigation to acknowledge truthers' evidence. As the truthers perceived it, the commission had little imagination in acknowledging the truth:

> [T]he Commission's greatest sin in drafting the Report was its failure to acknowledge the existence of alternative theories, much less respond to them. By offering and supporting its own narratives, the Commission only directly addressed conspiracy theories by implication – because it happened this way according to this evidence, the Report suggests, it could not have happened any other way. (126)

Based on a 2011 survey, nearly the entirety of the 2,000 Americans polled were familiar with at least one of the conspiracy theories presented to them, and over 55% of respondents agreed with at least one of the conspiracy theories (Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood, 956). If

this poll is representative of the American population, it is a staggering statistic. However, the seductive and socially divisive effects of conspiracy belief is not a strictly modern phenomenon. Since at least 1776, with Jedidiah Morse's Illuminati Conspiracy, which claimed that the Illuminati were actively working to destroy religious institutions and the nascent American experiment (Griffin, Charles J. G), Americans have given credence to conspiracy belief. The mysterious events surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination, for instance, produced one of the most famous American conspiracy theories, which continues to influence conspiracy theorists to this day. Other popular conspiracy theories have emerged that are widely embraced within conspiracy belief culture: some of these include the moon landing hoax, the global warming hoax, the idea that vaccines cause autism, and airplane "chemtrails." Although the previously mentioned survey indicated that a potentially high percentage of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory, a 2012 study found that when an individual believes in implausible explanations regarding a specific conspiracy theory, they are more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories (Swami, Viren, and Adrian Furnham, 251). Thus, many conspiracy theorists do not fixate and focus on just one conspiracy theory but believe several. These theories tend to accompany a worldview and thinking style: conspiracy belief functions as an existential philosophy that accounts for how the world operates. This world view, which I will henceforth call "conspiracy belief," interprets world events through a predominant lens of suspicion. Conspiracy theorists' suspicions have become more prevalent in recent years, making rampant predictions on certain powerful political institutions and wealthy individuals, predictions that usually entail justice for perceived crimes and wrong doings. Many of these predictions lack evidence and rely on the imagination to link extraneous stimuli to create events that are "likely" to happen – or believed to be happening behind the scenes. Yet, in the place of concrete

evidence, many of these predictions depend on previously established conspiracy theories as well as general conspiracy belief. As such, conspiracy belief incorporates a method of observation and interpretation that allows the imagination precedence over reason, and, at its heart, conspiracy belief's dominant use of the imagination echoes many of the theories and beliefs found within Romanticism.

In this chapter, the primary focus of conspiracy theory belief will be on the QAnon movement. This particular conspiracy theory is especially important because it is not just one conspiracy theory, but an umbrella "conspiracy-theory-of-everything," creating a canonical connection between new and old conspiracy theories. This establishes QAnon as an extremely malleable and inclusive conspiracy theory pantheon, allowing for new conspiracies and predictions to change elements of the theory, sometimes reforming in real time as events (perceived or otherwise) transpire. Yet, this amorphous theory has a particularly capricious manner of operation, in that the central hub consists of many – sometimes disparate – ideas. In this way, nearly all conspiracy-minded individuals and beliefs are welcome, and theorists are encouraged to use their imagination to create, expand upon, and devise alternative new theories, adding unique and eclectic variations to the already robust QAnon movement.

The encouragement of the use of the imagination in this belief system stems from the purported progenitor of the QAnon movement: "Q" himself/herself. One need only to peruse the almost 5,000 "Qdrops" – the short online conspiracy theory posts that were added sometimes daily (sometimes several times a day) – to see that Q, despite their purported "Q level" clearance status, does not claim to be the only individual able to ascertain valuable knowledge. In fact, very rarely does Q give direct, simple explanations of what the "conspiracy" entails. Often, the QDrops range from several dozen words to less than a hundred words. Hidden within these short

drops, as QAnon believers will attest, are numerous clues as to what is happening beyond the view of the undiscerning eye. QDrops, as such, are cryptic, truncated, grammatically simple, ostensibly ambiguous, and are devoid of actual objective information, leading readers (referred to as Anons) to come to their own conclusions based on their conspiracy belief. Scattered throughout many of these "drops" are suggestions that lead Anons to use particular cognitive tools when deciphering drops, in particular their imagination. These "suggestions" lead Anons to defer to their imagination and can be seen as a consistent rhetorical tool used throughout Q's posts. This refrain is seen specifically in QDrops such as "You can't imagine the size of this" (*Q Alerts*, Drop 1215); "Bigger than you can imagine" (*Q Alerts*, Drop 1214); "more sinister than ever imagined!" (*Q Alerts*, Drop 493); and "you can't possibly imagine" (*Q Alerts*, Drop 30). These drops tell the reader to imagine the bigger picture and to consider the cryptic posts as hints that lead to hidden meanings. By the power of suggestion, Q elicits a response in many Anons that causes them to "think outside the box," to look deeper than the surface level and to imagine what could be hiding in the shadows of publicly accepted events. Especially since most QDrops are not reliant on facts, but hints and suggestions – or carefully laid "breadcrumbs" – Anons are conditioned to interpret every event as an elaborate façade hiding something sinister. These suggestions, however, include more than just variations of the word "imagine." Related terms are common, such as "faith," "believe," and "trust." As will be discussed later in the chapter, the meaning behind these words, especially "faith," requires the use of the imagination for the desired effect to manifest. And many times, these words are used to suggest that Anons should not be comfortable with the obvious or publicly accepted explanation. This can be seen in Q's use of the refrain "Do you *believe* [emphasis added] in coincidences?" which is seen in QDrop 3597 (*Q Alerts*), as well dozens of others. These types of suggestions ask Anons to use their

imagination in considering whether the specific “coincidences” mentioned in the QDrops are probable, implying, again, that there is more than meets the eye, and that accepting the event as a coincidence would be an exercise in naivety. Because QDrops are intended to be “researched” by Anons, these “suggestions” take on the function of a pseudo-command rather than just a simple colloquial phrase. The power of suggestion has been well-studied over the years, but a recent study has shown that when an authority figure or trusted leader encourages someone to consider something by using their imagination, the belief is seen to be strengthened, even when the belief was not held or experienced before (Loftus, Elizabeth, et al., 692). In the case of QAnon, Q is very much considered an authority within the online community, as the individual(s) behind Q is/are believed to be extremely close to former President Trump (Rothschild, 14). It is important to understand that the “suggestion” used to incite Anons imagination is just one facet of the imagination’s complex role within conspiracy belief, and that there are many other ways in which the imagination – specifically a world-creating version of imaginative thought popularized by Romantic thinkers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – plays an important role in the dissemination of conspiracy belief in general, but especially within QAnon and its adjacent conspiracy theories.

As previously mentioned, conspiracy belief can be seen as a particular cognitive style that uses the imagination to filter external events and objects. This filtering process, of which the imagination plays the most important role, is the mitigating factor between real world events and the conspiracy theories that form around them. Unlike more objective approaches to establishing theories that explain events or reality, such as that attempted by the scientific method, conspiracy belief starts subjectively and defers to the imagination while subjectively viewing stimuli. It is important here to acknowledge that most scientists and philosophers agree that so-called “pure”

objectivity is not possible, and that, to a certain degree, we filter what we see through an ideological lens; that said, it is also important to note that there is a significant difference between the observations of a trained scientist or researcher and the observations of the conspiracy theorist. In the case of scientific observation, there are institutional mechanisms and constraints in place that limit the filtration of facts and biased conclusions, whereas many conspiracy theorists are untrained and lack institutional checks and balances. A study that focused on consumers of alternative media on social media found "that those who took a less systematic (more heuristic) approach to evaluating any evidence were more likely to end up with an account that was more consistent with their previous beliefs," even if the sources assessed were clearly peddling misinformation or were troll posts (Mocanu, Delia, et al. Pg. 1202). Although both methods of assessment aim for the truth of reality, individuals guided by conspiracy belief have often already made up their minds as to the conclusion of what they will find when they conduct research. The more subjective nature of conspiracy belief allows the conspiracy theorist to defer to the imagination while the external stimuli are actively being processed, subjectively filtering facts as they come in and forming a judgement and theory based on their preconceived structure of conspiracy belief. This allows the subjective imagination of the observer to play an active role in how the event is viewed, while it is being viewed in real time, essentially reforming it in the mind while simultaneously observing it. Despite the internally subjective nature of conspiracy belief, it is true that conspiracy theories usually rely on an external fragment of reality. Even so, the facts and evidence surrounding the event or object often bear little resemblance to what the conspiracy theories eventually develop into. In this way, objects, people, and events are enveloped by the imagination of the conspiracy theorist. Only then are the stimuli – often warped and undistinguishable from its source – considered and

applied to what the conspiracy theorist considers to be reality. Once this process is completed, the stimuli can be applied and fit into the over-arching conspiracy belief of the individual. As such, it is imagination that shapes and forms the objective stimuli to match conspiracy belief. It is like a detective who forms a working theory *before* interacting with any evidence. Essentially, it is an act of confirmation bias dominated by the imagination and conspiracy belief.

Conspiracy belief is inclined to apophenia, in that potentially random and disconnected phenomena are believed to be linked and indicate a higher truth or constant. Again, the process behind this – the glue that adheres these random stimuli together – is the imagination, in that it is the linking factor that creates the story necessary for these random events to seem connected. In this way, the imagination acts as a creator, or a "re-creator," like puzzle pieces being cut and manipulated so they can fit where they don't belong, creating the desired result. In this way, conspiracy belief's embrace of the imagination as an internal generator of reality, indeed, as a tool of demystification, uncannily echoes how the imagination is often deployed in Romantic poetry and philosophy.

The Element of Play Inherent in Conspiracy Belief

Kenneth H. Tucker, Jr. notes that, "[i]n the contemporary era, the internet serves as both reality and metaphor for this process of identity formation, for on the internet everything is permitted, one can play with different identities, constantly change and innovate, and engage in endless possibilities of playful self-formation" (Tucker, 371). In many ways, the idea of internet use and identity intertwining and incorporating an aspect of "play" captures the allure of the QAnon movement at the time of its inception, but also, in some ways, in its current state. QAnon developed on the internet as an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) (Rothschild, 50). The ARG was

made up of "Anons" – essentially players of the game – who at this time could be considered your average internet user (although, they were probably more advanced than your average Facebook user). Every Anon could contribute their creative narrative to a collective all-encompassing conspiracy story. Many of these Anons posed as characters with inside information that they wanted to share with the world. These stories consisted of a conglomeration of augments to already established conspiracy theories and whatever the recurring "character" the Anon had created had to offer:

> If you wanted to pretend to be a government operative neck-deep in a secret operation to take down the bad guys, 4chan's anarchic / pol/ forum would be the perfect place to do it…There was FBI Anon, who claimed to have "intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Clinton case." Another anon, HighwayPatrolman, made over a thousand posts alleging that high-level child-trafficking rings drained the blood of infants for a supposedly super-powerful drug called adrenochrome. Another anon, called Anon5 or Frank, created a crude map of "deep-state trafficking networks"—a concept that would resurface again and again in Q. (Rothschild, 36)

In essence, QAnon began as a collaborative game in which users worked – or played – at creating an "alternate reality" version of the world, with an emphasis on the malign deeds of powerful people in industry, finance, government, and the media. For the most part, "[u]sers knew exactly what the board was about, and loved to play along" (Rothschild, 35). Despite this, because of the political nature of this board and its proclivity to target a recurring cast of political figures, it is likely that most of the Anons believed that the stories they were crafting, although in

themselves false, had an element of truth to them. Most users may not have really believed that Hillary Clinton, for instance, drank the blood of children, but they *did* believe that their stories were insightful commentaries on the moral degradation and alien lifestyles of the politicians about whom they posted. Essentially, users made games out of creating allegories, and, as with the inherent nature of all storytelling, Anons believed that they were telling a lie to tell the truth.

Proto-QAnon's use of the imagination to create pertinent metaphors for society and human nature (what can be seen as an empirical perception) has some striking similarities to Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schiller's writings on the "play drive." Schiller's "play drive" was part of his theory regarding the creation of a more balanced and perfect conscious human, one in tune with both their natural and rational drives. This individual, Schiller believed, could see the truth of reality. This theory has many poignant parallels to what the early Anons were doing before QAnon became what it is today. For Schiller, the play drive represented the graceful dance of nature and reason. They could move together in concert, allowing both to thrive, but neither to dominate the dance:

> [T]he play impulse, in which both [nature and reason] operate in combination, will at the same time make our formal and our material constitution, our perfection and our happiness, contingent; it will therefore, just because it makes them both contingent, and because contingency vanishes with necessity, abolish the contingency in them both, and consequently bring form into the material and reality into the form. In proportion as it lessens the dynamic influence of the sensations and emotions, it will bring them in harmony with rational ideas; and in proportion as it deprives the laws of reason of their moral compulsion, it will reconcile them with the interest of the senses. (Schiller, 61)

Although most Romantic and Enlightenment thinkers never excluded each other's values outright, each respective school of thought had their proclivities. Schiller, however, believed that nature and reason were not mutually exclusive and argued that both viewpoints – a sense impulse (nature) and a form impulse (reason) – not only existed simultaneously, but that they were contingent upon each other. He believed that because both are reliant upon the other, they lose their contingency and simply become the essence of the perfect human. A higher order of human, then, needs both nature and reason, and once one has attained this "mastery" of both simultaneous leading and following, one reaches the apex of humanity: "WE have now reached the conception of a reciprocal action between the two impulses, of such a kind that the operation of the one at the same time confirms and limits the operation of the other, and each one severally reaches its highest manifestation precisely through the activity of the other" (Schiller, 60). It was in this way that Schiller believed that one would reach the "perfect" human form, and find a better, more truthful form in existence. Although the early QAnon movement's perceptions on politicians were essentially opinions, they were exercising a form of the reciprocal dance of imagination and rationality to expose what they believed were greater truths. Somewhere along the way, however, the conscious element – the liminal balance between imagination and rationality – shifted. As QAnon became more popular, their method of creation and interpretation began to resemble Blake's view on the dominance of the imagination.

Imagination's Stranglehold

"Q," the eventual "prophetic" leader of the QAnon movement, rose to prominence with predictions that ramped up the paranoid narrative. It was around 2017 that the lines between

metaphor and truth became blurred. Over time, Q's narrative became one of the most popular, piquing a level of curiosity that transcended the bounds of his original posting site. The movement was co-opted by an audience that was unaware of the Anon movement's original ARG element. This new audience tended to be older and "were as much as seven times more likely to share fake-news stories" (Rothschild, 52-53). The new audience believed that Q drops were facts of reality, and that Q was a person (or group) deep within the military intelligence community and close to President Trump. These new consumers were already primed with conspiracy belief, including, but not limited to, beliefs that Hillary Clinton was a corrupt politician who lied constantly. The primer for these beliefs had developed over decades, with events such as the Clinton email scandal and Benghazi, as well as rumors that Clinton had murdered her political rivals. Much like the early Anons' belief system informed their game of exposing "truth" through allegory, these new conspiracy theorists already had a belief system primed to believe Q's story. This deferment to an inherent belief, Coleridge defined as intuition: "the immediateness of any act or object of knowledge by the word intuition" (*Biographia*, 99). Coleridge believed that by using intuition, one could obtain knowledge that wasn't possible by way of reason alone. Knowledge, for Coleridge, was ascertained inwardly through our natural cognitive faculties, through the imagination:

> [T]here have been a few, who measuring and sounding the rivers of the vale at the feet of their furthest inaccessible falls have learned, that the sources must be far higher and far inward; a few, who even in the level streams have detected elements, which neither the vale itself nor the surrounding mountains contained or could supply. (*Biographia*, 151-52)

One sees uncanny parallels between Coleridgean intuition and the confirmation biases exhibited by conspiracy theorists. In my interview with former QAnon member Jitarth Jadeja, he describes how he perceives intuition in conspiracy belief: “There’s a misidentification of the feeling of intuition for something that just aligns with your preconceived notions, especially when you’re a little ways down the rabbit hole, in that something lines up or is in sync with previous things you’ve thought were correct. I think people with conspiratorial beliefs start mistaking that sense of subtle relief as intuition rather than confirmation bias.” Yet, despite potential misidentifications between intuition and conformation bias, a 2020 study found that people who displayed the jump to conclusion (JTC) bias “showed a significantly stronger preference for intuitive thinking style than subjects who did not jump to conclusions” (Pytlik, Nico, et al., 6). Furthermore, the study found that “[p]articipants who displayed the jumping to conclusions (JTC) bias were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories than subjects who did not jump to conclusions.” In this way, conspiracy theorists are more likely to believe they are using intuition when considering conspiracy theories and thus deferring to their already established conspiracy belief. Therefore, despite the chosen term – intuition or confirmation bias – conspiracy theorists often believe they are using their intuition to expose truth. This kind of intuition – a facet of the imagination celebrated by Romantic poets and philosophers such as Coleridge – is given priority when analyzing new stimuli, and the careful dance of both reason and imagination loses its stride. Like the detective who defers to their biased hunch rather than critically balancing imagination and facts, reason is trumped by intuition and the imagination, disequilibrating the synergistic dance that Schiller envisioned as the culturally refined coupling of Romantic and Enlightenment thought.

This imagination-centric approach is very similar to Blake's conception not only of reality, but of knowledge. Ronald Britton contends that "Blake regarded his imagination as the divine source, the creator, and he regarded belief as the act of creation" (179). For Anons, the very act of belief in QAnon requires a creative thinking style: Anons are "encouraged to research and interpret those messages, taking them in whatever direction they choose" (Rothchild, 19). Interpretation, then, plays a major role in that belief process. In order to figure out the "conspiracy" behind the event or person, Anons are required to use their imaginative faculties to see beyond the official story and evidence; the truth does not exist in what is overtly seen, but in the connections that can be made through imagination and intuition. Although prophetic in their allusion to future events, Q incorporates (after some lessons learned in prophesies that were too exact) strategies that successful prophets have employed for millennia: subtlety. It is this subtlety that makes QDrops so alluring, because hidden behind every word, metaphor, and intimation is a subjective meaning for every reader that is ripe for the imagination's limitless potential. And, as with every burgeoning community that develops around a specific topic, jargon began to develop that perpetuated the subtlety of the QDrops. These words and phrases implied a deeper meaning but did not explicitly lead readers toward specifically outlined ideas, besides perpetuating the general idea of a conspiracy. These vague statements and refrains function as aphorisms, implying some unknown but assumed truth that Anons were free to imagine and interpret at their discretion. Especially when QAnon's popularity rose and transcended its original bounds onto the major social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, the "characters, events, symbols, shibboleths, and jargon" (Rothschild, 20) of QAnon were not always readily known. For many Anons, Q's messages – such as those seen in QDrops 4938 ("PLEASE FIX THE BREAD AND TIDY UP THE SHIP"), or 4768 ("Judgement is coming") or 723 ("SEC_TEST")

(*Q Alerts*) – could indicate a plethora of different meanings. This further perpetuated the subjective nature of interpreting QDrops. This act deviates significantly from early Anons' intentions – the metaphors that represented higher societal truths – and creates an imbalance in relation to Schiller's theories on the correlation between imagination and reason. Each interpretation is an act that displaces reason with conspiracy belief and imagination. Reason, then, becomes a secondary player. It is no longer informing – and informed by – imagination, but instead used to affirm the imagination and conspiracy belief's judgements. In the mind of the QAnon consumer, the conspiracy theory is not a metaphor or an allegory, but "objective" fact. Each QDrop, regardless of Q's intention or original meaning, becomes an act of subjective meaning-making, often relevant and meaningful to each respective individual who decodes it. The theories and interpretations, however subjective they may have been when first created, began to gain traction when they were shared online for others to either accept, augment, or reject. As will be explained in Chapter Three, this "sharing" is a call to awaken another individual's intuition. As these subjective interpretations rose in popularity, and the dominant theories became canonical within the community, the shady individuals' – those at the center of the conspiracies – intentions were as clear daylight. Conspiracy theorists saw the moral degradation of the rich and powerful, those vying for control through the exploitation of an obsequious technocratic society, and they increasingly relied on the imagination's power to counteract conspirators' corrupt endeavors. Indeed, through the knowledge gained by imagination and intuition, conspiracy theorists believed they could see the difference between deceptions and truth as clearly as "night" and "day," a metaphor often seen in Blake's writing.

Blake used the metaphor of night and day to depict the difference between the true knowledge of the imagination and the bleak fog of rationality. Light is used to represent

imagination and boundless, truthful knowledge, whereas darkness is used to represent pure rationalism devoid of imagination and knowledge. With this metaphor Blake suggests that "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only." (Blake, "There Is No Natural Religion"). Examples of this can be seen in "Holy Thursday" in *Songs of Experience* (1794), in which Blake depicts the difference between the selfishness of rationality, and the all-encompassing knowledge found in the imagination:

> And their sin does never shine,
> And their fields are bleak and bare,
> And their ways are fill'd with thorns;
> It is eternal winter there.
>
> For where-e'er the sun does shine,
> And where-e'er the rain does fall,
> Bae can never hunger there,
> Nor poverty the mind appall. (Lines 9-16)

In this poem, as in much of Blake's work, he is responding directly to strict Enlightenment thought, not only portraying what a purely rational world might look like, but also the alternative: what the mind and world can look like if humanity embraces the imagination as the source of true reality. For Blake, there was a profound ethical and epistemological difference between rationality and imagination; rationality blocked the light of humanity, sapping the child-

like ambition and wonder from life. Even more disturbing, Blake believed it shackles humanity to the bounds of the Earth, cutting them off from God and the truth of existence.

Although it is difficult to say if it is intentional or not, there is a similar recurring theme within the QAnon movement. The followers, despite believing that they rely on rationality and research to find the truths of reality, are more in line with Blake's perspective. They use their imagination to manifest inherent beliefs, refraining from purely logical conclusions and rationale. As such, conspiracy theorists look at their *awakened* state much like Blake looks at an imaginative existence, believing themselves to see the world in a way that reflects true reality, and that their detractors are still *sleeping*, unable to see the world as it is. Q echoes the sentiments of the "bleak and bare fields" cultivated by the purely rational society when Q tells their followers: "You are not meant to think for yourself. You are not meant to challenge their power [control]. Obey and accept. Illusion of Democracy" and that "UNITY IS STRENGTH. UNITY IS POWER. UNITY IS HUMANITY. Controlled media plays a major role in shaping the narrative(s) to keep you powerless [helpless] and ASLEEP [unaware of truth]" (*Q Alerts*, Drop 4748). In QDrops such as this, Q is establishing a similar binary metaphor that was so important to Blake's depiction of true knowledge. For QAnon believers, they see the world as it really is, depicted by the light of day and the awareness of wakefulness. In contrast, they believe that most of the public is asleep: comfortable and docile in their beds, surrounded by a veiled darkness that psychologically blinds them to reality, dreaming of a false world that does not exist. This idea, however, is complicated. Although conspiracy theorists would agree that they are "awakened," they would not see themselves as disciples of Blake – as those that see truth through imagination – but as disciples of rationality. However, a recent study shines some light onto the disparity between rationality and imagination in conspiracy belief. The 2020 study

found “that participants who performed less well in an open-ended test capturing critical thinking ability in the context of argumentation believed more in conspiracy theories” (Lantian, Anthony, et al, 18). This study seems to suggest that when conspiracy theorists are forming their conspiracy theories (as seen in interpretations of QDrops), or accepting others’ interpretations, that there is less critical thinking in the process of analyzing these beliefs. Although correlation is not causation, as there are many factors that are involved in beliefs of all kinds, the study can indicate that conspiracy theorists’ hierarchy of analysis gives less priority to rationality and critical thinking, and possibly more weight to imaginative and intuitive conclusions. In this way, again, the echoes of Romantic thought can be seen to exist within conspiracy belief. Yet, unlike Romanticism, conspiracy belief does not seem to recognize the imagination as the source of its creation and depiction of reality, instead seeing itself as the populist child of the Enlightenment.

Regarding conspiracy theorists’ belief system, it is existentially important to them that their interpretations of world events adhere, in their minds, to the code of reason and rationality. Britton explains that “Blake regarded his imagination as the divine source, the creator, and he regarded belief as the act of creation; self-doubt he saw as destruction” (179). For his beliefs to maintain, Blake was correct to fear self-doubt, and conspiracy belief echoes this fear, for self-doubt, if nourished, is a dangerous seed that can lead to the destruction of any belief system. Much like religious belief, faith is an integral component of the sustainability of belief and works against any outside stimuli that might challenge the belief system. Facts that cannot be augmented by the imagination are a threat to the reality that the imagination has created. Thus, instead of fully weighing contradicting facts, these threats are denied any claim to reality, disavowed without true consideration. In the situation when the imagination cannot reform a problematic fact into an asset in the favor of conspiracy belief, it is instead used as proof of the

hostility of the "enemy" and/or the sleeping, ignorant public. Consider, for example, when a QAnon supporter armed with an assault rifle barricaded himself on a bridge and demanded that Trump release QAnon-affirming information that was purported to be in Trump's procession. This information, Anons believed, would confirm the veracity of all their assertions; they would finally be vindicated. However, with such a public act of potential of violence (although it ended peacefully), both conspiracy theorists and society saw a man that appeared to be suffering from deranged beliefs. However, this is hardly how conspiracy theorists saw themselves, and as such, this public event could not be accepted for what it was, nor could it be allowed to reflect on conspiracy theorists. As a result, instead of conspiracy theorists succumbing to self-doubt, the event was transformed into something that instead confirmed their beliefs. As Blake warns, do not allow belief to be threatened by anything: "If the Sun and Moon should Doubt / They'd immediately Go out" (Blake, Auguries of Innocence" Lines 109-10). Therefore, the event became, as conspiracy theorists saw it, a dangerous parody meant to deceive the public and make conspiracy theorists look uncredible. With events like this, self-examination becomes a threat to belief, and believers use the event to further confirm their beliefs instead. Paradoxically, potentially belief-threatening events or evidence serve to add substance to the belief, affirming it instead of bringing its veracity into question. After the event, one Anon displayed this mechanism of faith online: "'[False flag] on Hoover Dam to make those wanting the IG report to be released in full unredacted made to look crazy?'" (Rothschild, 62). The importance of unmitigated belief for conspiracy theorists is paramount, for if even one belief is threatened, the foundation in its entirety collapses and everything is open to questioning. Britton confirms this sentiment about Blake: "[he] eschewed impersonal reason, common sense and objectivity for profound psychological reasons, and as such he speaks for many others who may well be highly

educated, and even infused with Mediterranean culture, but nevertheless fear that their subjective existence may be annihilated by the objectivity of others." (179). Just like Blake's belief system, and arguably all systems of belief, conspiracy belief hinges upon mechanisms that protect itself from countering objective stimuli, because what is a belief system if not the foundation of reality and existence? If conspiracy beliefs cannot stand up to the objectivity of the world, then, as will be discussed in the next chapter, psychological existence becomes vulnerable to the sublime chaos of the world. In this way, the imagination's ability to co-opt external stimuli and transform them into belief-affirming representations of outward reality is an extremely important tool to continued faith and belief in conspiracy theories.

Faith & Imagination

Although continued belief is integral to maintaining the structure of perceived reality, something that is equally important – and in many ways another facet of belief – is faith. Faith is the blood that flows through the veins and allows the continuation of motion. It allows one to continue to believe something even when expectations are not met and disappointment ensues. When a predicted event does not occur as promised, faith can help the belief structure from collapsing. Through the course of the QAnon movement, Anons experienced a

> string of failures that included the disaster in the 2018 midterms, the failure of any of the various memos or "real" investigations by Devin Nunes and other Trump supporters in Congress to hit pay dirt, and Robert Mueller failing to indict any pedophiles. Indeed, there were no indictments of anyone involved in the "deep state." (Rothschild, 85)

Many of these vacant predictions were claimed by Q to have already happened, be in the process of happening, or coming to fruition soon. But, despite the deluge of failed predictions, faith and imagination have allowed belief to remain on course and ensure that doubt does not take hold. Researchers found that if people are "imagining hypothetical future events … [it] may render those events subjectively more likely" (Loftus, 703). Coleridge saw the process of imagination and truth as something akin to faith, as a cycle that is in constant motion. This type of imagination, which he referred to as the "secondary imagination" stood in contrast to the "primary imagination," which could conceive of perfect truth and knowledge but was beyond the grasp of human control and reproduction. The primary imagination existed deep within the individual and could only be imperfectly understood through bursts of intuition. Secondary imagination, however, is within the realm of control and it is through this tool that the right kind of man or woman – the poetical sort – can attempt to take the perfect knowledge of the primary imagination and manifest it externally, albeit imperfectly. Coleridge believed that poetry was the means to do this, that through this cognitively complex linguistic medium, truth could be found. However, through the process of putting words on paper, the truth lost some of its purity. In this way, in attempting to channel the knowledge found in the primary imagination, the poet must have faith and confidence that he/she had the means to translate the knowledge to the best of their ability, as imperfect as it may be. If the poet doubted their ability, the doubt would sever their intuitive connection to truth, and all potential connection to the knowledge of imagination would be lost. As such, the poet, as a vessel for knowledge, must let their imagination and beliefs hold strong: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the finite I AM… It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered

impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital" (*Biographia*, 186). It seems that Coleridge recognizes that the process of the secondary imagination's attempts in translating the primary imagination's truth is a constant "struggle," but also that it must be continuously attempted, and that, despite the expected stumbles along the way, faith must light the dark path toward truth and knowledge. The QAnon movement has a similar mentality: the truth that they are trying to expose is so much more important than the false starts, the unfulfilled predictions, and the embarrassments. They continue to look to the horizon for the ship that will bring them the news they so desire, and even if it did not arrive today, its mast will protrude over the horizon tomorrow. Blake "saw belief as truth, formed by imagination and not received by perception; not seeing is believing but believing is seeing" (Britton, 179). In this way, the only way to believe in something that has not yet manifested is to continue to envision its reality within the mind, through the imagination. Like Blake's "believing is seeing," to imagine an event is to effectively make it real. In other words, Hillary Clinton and the Deep State may not have been foiled yet, *but the Patriots will continue to fight, and plans are being developed as we speak…* It is this imagined future that takes on a solid feeling of reality and allows the conspiracy theorist to continue their belief even though proof and vindication has yet to materialize. The Romantic imagination, with its different facets and mechanisms, once again is seen to protect and maintain conspiracy belief. But, as we will see, some Romantic proponents of the imagination, such as Coleridge, were not ignorant of the thornier side of the imagination and what could happen if it was not cultivated with care.

The Threat of The Unbridled Romantic Imagination

When juxtaposed, Romantics such as Blake and Coleridge have different theories on how the imagination determines knowledge, but both agree that the imagination is the source of true knowledge when perceiving the reality of the world. Conspiracy theorists view themselves in a similar way, whether they believe it's derived from reason, intuition, or otherwise. They perceive themselves as "awake," arming themselves with the imagination and seeing the truth of reality to actively resist control and the darker aspects of what they see. Essentially, they believe that in their heightened state, they have a responsibility to expose the dark forces that are trying to subvert innocence and our way of life. As Jadeja informed Rothschild, "'You are saving the world when you're in Q, [it's] the highest way you can view yourself'" (81). This heightened state, however, is a double-edged sword. It unleashes a Pandora's box of dark truths that, once seen, cannot be forgotten or ignored. Jadeja went on to say that Anons "'can only overcome [the darkness] by thinking they're doing the most important thing that can be done.'" The idea that this second-sight is both a gift and curse is very reminiscent of themes seen in Romantic poetry, but especially in particular poems by George Gordon Byron and John Keats. Literary critic Jerome J. McGann explains that, although the Romantic imagination is the source of creation and knowledge, it is also extremely dangerous to the psyche, in that it reveals the hidden and dangerous world beyond the veil of typical human conception. In reference to Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), McGann observes:

> What is most stirring about this great passage is the "lurking thought" of pity and despair. Imagination and poetry do not offer a relief and escape but a permanent and self-realized

> condition of suffering, a Romantic Agony. The “hopeless flight” of “those that walk in darkness” is not removed when that flight becomes an eternal one; on the contrary, the hopelessness is raised to a pitiful and tragic level precisely because the Pilgrim of Eternity no longer has any illusions about the human world he sees, no longer has any illusions about himself. The Romantic imagination does not save, it offers, like Keats's Moneta, a tragic understanding. (131-132)

Byron understood that there is a significant tradeoff in obtaining the knowledge that the Romantic imagination can produce. It’s easy to see this parallel in conspiracy belief when the believer embraces intuition and the roads that imagination can lead them down. As the conspiracy theorist acknowledges the essence of humanity, with all its inherent capacity for innocence, curiosity, and good, they must also acknowledge its inherent capacity for immorality, corruption, and evil. Thus, they must suffer the curse of the prophet’s knowledge, knowing that society does not believe or comprehend their knowledge. Keats also acknowledged this Romantic contradiction in his poem “Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds” (1818):

> Or is it that Imagination brought
> Beyond its proper bound, yet still confin'd,
> Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
> Cannot refer to any standard law
> Of either earth or heaven? It is a flaw
> In happiness to see beyond our bourn,--
> It forces us in summer skies to mourn,

It spoils the singing of the Nightingale. (Lines 69-76)

Unfortunately for many conspiracy theorists who wander too far into the Romantic imagination, they too experience a profound depression in seeing beyond the "proper bound." Numerous examples can be seen, such as the man who barricaded himself on a bridge, or the man who led police on a dangerous car chase with his young daughters in the backseat, or the man who believed that deep-state manipulation of his stocks led to the loss of millions of dollars, eventually causing him to turn on family and friends, going so far as to threaten his daughter's life. For these individuals, the "Romantic depression" (to coin a term) that Byron and Keats acknowledged, was elevated to a severe level. For the extreme conspiracy theorists mentioned above, their "Romantic depression" evolved into a kind of madness that altered their already divergent view on reality, to the point that the monsters that QAnon exposed were now actively targeting their livelihood and happiness. Examples of QAnon negatively altering lives and destroying relationships are legion, but tragic cases like the aforementioned individuals are examples of those who have descended into the most dangerous territory of belief. Admittedly, these extreme cases raise the question of whether they were already mentally ill, or if the belief led to a mental breakdown. Either way, delving into the unbridled Romantic imagination can be dangerous for some. Coleridge examined these caveats during his exploration of the imagination, as seen in his periodical, *The Friend*.

According to Patricia Mavis Jenkin, over the last several decades, scholars have more openly acknowledged "Coleridge's misgivings about the insufficiently controlled imagination" (193). As Schiller saw the interlocking and complementing relationship between imagination and reason, so too did Coleridge, although he still privileged the imagination as the ultimate path to

truth. Despite this, Coleridge begrudgingly acknowledged that the imagination, with its grand power of creation, also had a darker side that – if not properly controlled – could result in a kind of madness. Much like the belief structure within the QAnon movement, in which imagination forms and expands upon reality, Coleridge believed that in certain instances, the "imagination creeps in and counterfeits the memory" (Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 1, 237). Interestingly, this idea is backed up by the aforementioned modern-day study on the power of imagination and suggestion. But Coleridge's ideas on what the imagination can do if not used correctly went beyond the shaping of and falsification of memories. Coleridge believed that harnessing the imagination must be an "action by the will and understanding" (*Biographia*, 194). Otherwise, as Coleridge writes in *The Friend*, the imagination can lead to a kind of mania, in which the individual cannot tell the difference between the inner workings of their mind and external reality (Jenkins, 198). This is one of the important differences between Coleridge's and Blake's conceptions of imagination: not only in the severity of its creative power, but also how it interacts with the outside world. They both, however, acknowledge that the imagination can affect, in different capacities, the world outside the individual. For Coleridge, without careful control over the imagination, one could fall into a dangerous space, as Jenkin notes: "imagination must be coupled with conscious thought to become fully operative; this shadowy state of the imagination goes astray without the aid of judgement" (194). Some QAnon believers have made irreversible choices guided by conspiracy belief and imagination, allowing the "shadowy state" to take control and become reality. They have entered the dangerous realm that Coleridge warned about, the space in which imagination has full control over the individual.

Despite Romanticism's varying theories and viewpoints on the role and power of the imagination, conspiracy belief seems to contain many of the attributes that Romantics found in

common. Conspiracy belief is complex, sometimes utilizing the imagination as a lens of reality, as Blake did – but with the caveat of potentially suffering from the madness that Coleridge warned of, or the Romantic depression that Keats and Byron experienced, or potentially existing in the balanced state that Schiller theorized and of which Coleridge saw a semblance, as in the early ARG that gave birth to QAnon. These different uses and understandings of the imagination, much like the Romantic movement itself, do not fit neatly into any one box, but they have one thing in common: the notion that the imagination plays a pivotable role in the accruement of truth and knowledge. In this way, conspiracy belief – perhaps unwittingly – contains epistemological echoes of Western Romanticism and might even be classified as a twenty-first century neo-Romantic movement.

CHAPTER TWO

Transcendence Through Understanding: The Romantic Sublime in Conspiracy Belief

> The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or the gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure.
>
> —Thomas Weiskel (3)

Conspiracy theories are deeply rooted in the belief that many of the world's important events are orchestrated with nefarious intentions by the rich and powerful. These events usually consist of unthinkable calamities in which lives are lost, the veneer of peace is tarnished, and the very foundation of society is irrevocably damaged. Events such as the Sandy Hook Massacre and 9/11 conjure up feelings of sublime horror and confusion at a societal level and leave many searching for answers and closure. Often, however, the answers supplied are incomplete, replete with jargon, and convoluted. Further, these events – even with explanations – are difficult to comprehend: why would someone murder twenty children at an elementary school, or why would a group attack innocent people in the twin towers? As such, the explanations often inhabit the realm of the unknown, leaving many with a strong sense of unease. But whereas most come

to terms with the idea that life is inherently chaotic and mysterious and accept the most reasonable explanations (incomplete or otherwise), others – such as those inclined to conspiracy belief – aim to explain certain events in such a way as to nullify the feeling of unease, to fill in gaps that assuage elements of chaos and mystery. It is in this act that conspiracy belief finds itself teetering on the edge of the Romantic sublime, simultaneously acknowledging it and denying its existence. Whereas William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge would acknowledge the sublime and attempt transcendence through the acceptance of the chaotic, mysterious, and terrifying nature of existence, a conspiracy theorist would acknowledge it and attempt to explain away its unexplainable qualities, firmly grounding the sublime in the realm of conscious human causality. Despite this difference, it will be shown that conspiracy belief still manages to find a unique kind of transcendence through the sublime. Conspiracy belief, then, will be analyzed through different interpretations of the Romantic sublime, and it will be shown that conspiracy theorists' acknowledgement and denial of the sublime establishes them as a neo-Romantic movement.

During the late eighteenth century, various philosophers began to establish theories on what would come to be known as the Romantic sublime. Many centuries before, the Greek rhetorician and philosopher Longinus developed his theory of the sublime, which, in his eyes, constituted a moment of rhetorical passion in writing that shocked the reader and broke down preconceived notions on a subject or idea: "[T]he Sublime is a supreme excellence and perfection of language; and that by this, and this alone, the greatest writers in poetry and prose achieved their preeminence, and won for their own reputations the guerdon of immortality" (2-3). Over the centuries, however, the sublime's essence gradually became less rhetorical, and began to resemble something more akin to a force of nature. Edmund Burke was one of the first

philosophers to view the sublime as a psychological phenomenon in relation to outside experience. Burke attempted to distinguish the feelings of joy that one experiences in the presence of beauty and the joy experienced in the presence of the sublime; about the latter he wrote: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (13). He went on to explain that when one experiences this kind of disconnected “pain and danger,” there is a sense of awe and joy: “passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (41). Burke’s conception of the sublime was an experience that simultaneously allows one to feel the terror of danger and subsequently the joy of being disconnected and safe from it. He exemplifies this feeling as what one experiences when standing on the precipice of an abyss or as the psychological terror one experiences when considering the infinite vastness and timelessness of space. However, whereas Blake attempted to differentiate the beautiful from the sublime and empirically explain the latter phenomenon, William Wordsworth attempted to expand the idea of the sublime by considering the transcendental implications it has for the observer’s soul and for their connection with the whole of nature.

Wordsworth & The Hurdles of Sublime Transcendence

Wordsworth believed that sublime experience could not occur without the participation of the soul. This is in part a response to the Enlightenment-era proclivity toward reductionism and empiricism. Thomas Weiskel explains that the Romantic sublime developed in part as

> a response to the darker implications of [John] Locke's psychology and what that psychology represented of changes in perception. If the only route to the intellect lies through the senses, belief in a supernatural Being finds itself insecure. God had to be saved, even if He had to marry the world of appearances. And so, in the natural sublime, He did… The emotions traditionally religious were displaced from the Deity and became associated first with the immensity of space and secondarily with the natural phenomena (oceans, mountains) which seemed to approach that immensity. Soon a sense of the numinous was diffused through all the grander aspects of nature. The mental result was enormously to enhance the prestige of the sensible imagination as the faculty which mediated the divine presence felt to be immanent in nature, or at least likely to be evoked by nature's grander aspect. Indeed, the imagination became the surest guide and recourse for the moral sense. (14)

Wordsworth worried that aspects of Enlightenment thought were diminishing the role of the soul; the human was no longer at the center of nature, but merely a tool to analyze the external experience. James Heffernan explains that "[f]or [Wordsworth], the 'sources of sublimity' lay not in nature, but rather deep within the 'soul of Man'; experience of the sublime…was impossible without the exertion of *power* in the mind" (607). This focus on the human as a part of the sublime experience is similar to conspiracy theorists' reluctance to accept that elements of chaos are at the root of major events and phenomena; both conspiracy theorists and Wordsworth allow the human to play a central role in the sublime experience. They both perceive that the sublime event takes place within the individual – derived from intuition and imagination – but is in response to external stimuli, much like the process of imagination described in Chapter One. Yet, for Wordsworth, the soul was also an extremely important part of the process and result; the

soul was paramount to human experience and being, connecting humankind to the greater nature. Weiskel distinguishes the nature of Locke's conception of the soul from how Wordsworth conceived it, clarifying that "[i]f the soul is the locus of order and has no essential substance independent of the ideas it entertains, the moment of discontinuity will reveal a frightening vacancy. The Lockean model subverts the autonomy of mind or soul; the mind is not its own place, but the space in which semiotic sublimations occur" (17). In other words, according to Locke – whom we might think of as a representative Enlightenment philosopher – the soul was nothing more than a vessel, a metaphor and container for knowledge. Wordsworth, however, perceived a new and important connection to the soul that eclipsed its metaphorical function as a mere vessel for knowledge. Under the correct conditions, Wordsworth divined that a sublime event could instill one with "the notion or image of intense unity, with which the Soul is occupied or possessed" (5). The awe one experiences in the presence of the sublime was a breakdown of the ego, of understanding, and of the ability to construct meaning. It is this breakdown that is actively resisted by contemporary conspiracy belief: through the act of explanation, conspiracy belief attempts to add meaning to the sublime, relegating it to the realm of human action. For Wordsworth, however, this attempt at understanding aborts an important effect of experiencing the sublime. By disconnecting oneself from the normal human condition, one could transcend and become more in tune with one's soul, experiencing a sense of oneness with the whole of nature. To experience this transcendence, however, one must accept the sublime in all its mysterious and chaotic glory; it "[awakens] energy either that would resist or that hopes to participate," but, if after the sublime event, the observer does not allow the "apprehensions which [the sublime] excites [to] terminate in repose, there can be no sublimity" (5). In this way, Wordsworth seems to acknowledge that there is an element of unease intrinsic to

the experience of the sublime, and that one might be tempted to question and understand the sublime to quell one's anxiety. This is seen when conspiracy theorists experience unexplainable events: "hypersensitivity to agency appears to be a unique predictor of beliefs in conspiracy theories" (Douglas, et al 71). Instead of allowing the soul to take charge, as Wordsworth proposed, conspiracy theorists relinquish control to the "apprehensions" and attempt to find explanations that relegate the sublime to "agency," an entity of intentional human creation. Wordsworth believed that these "apprehensions" were impediments in the process of sublime transcendence, that for transcendence to occur one must instead consent to be spirited away.

In this way, conspiracy belief's drive to explain the sublime, or to explain it away in this case, is an attempt to subdivide it into more palatable parts that are less painful to comprehend. Wordsworth, however, did not deny the importance of the parts: "[t]he capacity to distinguish, therefore, was… an indispensable part of the capacity to relate; for it was only in terms of multiplicity that the pervasive unity of nature emerged" (Heffernan, 611). Simply put, Wordsworth believed that the parts exist because of the whole of nature; the heart exists to serve the body. As such, the parts played their role in the sublime, but ultimately, they were superseded by the whole that they served. Heffernan explains that "[w]hat [Wordsworth] experienced at Snowdon, in the final reckoning, was a sublime sense of interfusion, a unity which pervaded multiplicity without suppressing it. And in this spectacle of interfusion, wherein natural objects were mutually modified by virtue of their interchangeable supremacy, Wordsworth found a fitting emblem of the unifying power of the imagination" (614-15).

Through the analysis of Wordsworth's writings, Weiskel identifies three distinct phases in the process of subliminal transcendence. In the first phase, the connection with the sublime object is largely unconscious; the observer beholds the object but does not contemplate or

interrogate it. In the second phase, the sublime object or event overwhelms the observer. The correlation between the observer's mind and the sublime object becomes skewed and indeterminate. In the third phase, the mind retains a sense of balance. This is the critical phase for Wordsworth, where the observer either experiences a sense of transcendence or reverts to a rational style of thinking. In the latter case, all transcendental potentialities supplied by the sublime collapse and fail to have any effect on the observer (Weiskel, 23-24). Through these three phases, Weiskel shows that there is a process to the experience of sublimation that both Wordsworth and Coleridge theorized and experienced. The process outlines how the sublime affects the individual's perspective and creates a distinction between the acceptance of the sublime and the possibility that the observer could deny or attempt to subdue the sublime. This is where conspiracy belief falls into the realm of Wordsworth's conception of the sublime, in that a conspiracy theorist both acknowledges and experiences the sublime event but fails – or consciously disallows – the manifestation of subliminal transcendence to occur.

This subliminal process can be seen in the complex and seemingly contradictory nature of the Romantic sublime within conspiracy belief. When a conspiracy theorist experiences a sublime event, they go through the first two phases that Weiskel outlines, but it is during the third phase that the "apprehensions" take hold and conspiracy theorists attempt to rationalize the sublime. Although this seems to be more in line with Enlightenment thinking, the denial of the sublime is not an empirical process, but more in line with Romantic proclivities: instead of a strict rationalization of the sublime, the process and determination of cause and effect is deferred to the control of the imagination. This process, which was discussed in Chapter One, allows for the imagination to take precedence, lacking the balance that Schiller theorized. Thus, although conspiracy belief deviates from Wordsworth's conception of sublimity during the third phase,

the experience still very much exists within the conception of the Romantic sublime: the conspiracy theorist is not simply denying the existence of the sublime but attempting comprehension and explanation through imagination. Further, the process that Wordsworth describes does not necessarily require transcendence to be considered a sublime experience. In other words, the failure to reach transcendence does not preclude the sublime event that initiated the possibility of transcendence. Wordsworth contends that

> by awakening energy either that would resist or that hopes to participate, the sublime is called forth. But if the Power contemplated be of that kind which neither admits of the notion of resistance or participation, then it may be confidently said that, unless the apprehensions which it excites terminate in repose, there can be no sublimity, and that this sense of repose is the result of reason and the moral law. (5)

Wordsworth argues that the sublime event exists even when there are feelings "that would resist," but that the "sublimity" – the transcendence obtained from the sublime – is lost when one submits to "reason." In this way, the sublime that exists within conspiracy belief is a neo-Romantic mechanism: it is paradoxically an acknowledgement of the sublime *and* an attempt to understand it. While a conspiracy theorist would not claim that their intent in explaining these events was an act of thwarting the sublime, it can be seen from an outside perspective as an attempt to give purpose to events that otherwise seem to have no meaning, to make sense of the arbitrary nature of existence. Thus, rather than focusing on the transcendental capabilities of the sublime, conspiracy belief instead focuses on relegating the sublime to human causality, effectually dismissing the potentially disturbing and chaotic implications at the heart of the

sublime. A pertinent example of this can be seen in the horrible event that transpired in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary and the conspiracy theories that subsequently developed around the event.

The Sublime Nature of The Sandy Hook Massacre

On December 14th, 2012, one of the most horrific and deadliest mass shootings in American history took place at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. The unthinkable event left twenty-eight people dead, twenty of whom were children. The public was completely shocked, and as accounts of the event flooded media, a parent in California, Tiffany Moser, held her children closer, fearing that something similar could happen to her. At the same time, she could hardly believe that the massacre had happened at all. An article about the tragedy recounts how Moser felt:

> "I was really traumatized by what happened at Sandy Hook"…. Moser kept her children out of school for a few days after the shooting and was looking for information about how the families were holding up when she stumbled upon the Sandy Hook Hoax group. "I told them, I don't really know what the heck you people are doing, but I'd like to believe these little babies didn't die." (Wiedeman, 4)

Like many people who watched the aftermath unfold, it was extremely difficult for Moser to process what had happened. How could someone be so devoid of humanity that they would kill innocent children? It's a terrifying event to consider, one that almost begs for explanations. Thus,

it is not surprising that the Sandy Hook Massacre would inspire conspiracy theories under the guise of explanations.

According to an online article, one of the fathers who lost a child at Sandy Hook related that "[t]he conspiracy theories started the same day. They started right away. I wasn't paying attention to the news or social media for weeks, so I wasn't aware of it at the time. But as soon as I went online, I noticed" (Martin). Before the parents had time to comprehend the event and grieve, people online were already developing theories of what *really* happened. Some claimed that the parents were crisis actors, that the children never existed, that no one had been killed, and that it was a false flag event. But, as Moser demonstrates, not all the burgeoning conspiracy theorists were motivated by the perceived political implications of the event. As Reeves Wiedeman explains, some people "simply can't fathom a man killing 20 children and were looking for a more comforting explanation" (4). Many people didn't want to believe that children had died, that such events could just *randomly* happen at any place and time. In this way, before the facts of the event were ironed out and solidified, anyone with access to the internet could easily find an "alternate" explanation of the event. Videos, social media posts, blogs, and articles were already overpowering the sparse facts that were known at the time. Conspiracy theories were accepted by some of the public because they made more sense than the sublime alternative. From one perspective, this is nothing new: humans have always looked to explain events and occurrences in a way that makes sense; but an important difference with conspiracy belief is the tendency to employ *apophenia* in difficult-to-decipher scenarios, which is defined as the tendency to link and find patterns in objectively unrelated data (Hannah, 2). As such, conspiracy theorists often look for links in random stimuli with the goal of explaining the mysteries within a sublime event or experience. If we look at this from a facet of the Romantic perspective,

however, Coleridge would likely disagree that the breakdown of the sublime was the actual goal, but instead the penultimate step in a complicated process. For Coleridge, the search for meaning was only a steppingstone in the sublime experience, a natural occurrence that eventually could lead to the acceptance of the sublime's enigmatic and impenetrable nature. Only when this acceptance occurred could one reach the true goal of the sublime: transcendence.

Coleridge's Sublime Meaning & Blake's Warning

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) might be read as a narrative about cause and effect; with one unfortunate and selfish act, the mariner's ship experiences tragedy, and subsequently the mariner is cursed to warn society of the effects of his transgression. If one were to look at the poem differently, it could instead be interpreted as a Coleridge's perception of the arbitrary and incomprehensible nature of the sublime. David Vallins distinguishes Coleridge's views on transcendence through the sublime:

> Later in [Coleridge's] career, however, the thought of Schelling and the *Naturphilosophen* provided Coleridge with more vivid and intellectually satisfying models of such a process of ascent, contrasting the "dogmatic" outlook of materialist thinkers with the reflective and critical attitude of transcendental idealism, which Coleridge (like Schelling) sees as rising above everyday consciousness through the very process of interpreting and explaining it, yet as ultimately being unable wholly to reconcile the objective with the subjective pole of experience. (112)

From the perspective of Coleridge, the questions that the sublime raise are difficult to completely disregard, but ultimately, one must accept its nature as something beyond the realm of human understanding. In this way, conspiracy belief's tendency to explain the sublime cannot be considered as a complete deviation from Coleridge's theories, but rather as only one piece of the puzzle. According to Vallins, Coleridge did not believe that questioning the sublime interrupted the transcendental process, but that for transcendence to occur, the futility of the *questioning* must be acknowledged and accepted. The breakdown can occur, but only to the degree in which it applies to the more important mystery and wholeness of nature.

In many ways, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a useful lens through which to look at conspiracy belief, because it delineates an epistemological process that is similar to how conspiracy theorists interact with the sublime. When the mariner arbitrarily kills the albatross – a creature believed to mitigate the dangers of the ocean – it appears that he pays for his crime through the mechanism of causality. Not long after the deed is done, a ghost ship manifests the visage of death and retribution: "Her lips were red, her looks were free, / Her locks were yellow as gold: / Her skin was as white as leprosy, / The Night-Mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she" (Lines 190-93). The terrifying arbiter of retribution kills all the ship's inhabitants except for the mariner himself. As penance for his crimes, however, he bears the curse of a nomadic life, compelled to warn others of the consequences of his crime: "He prayeth best, who loveth best /All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us / He made and loveth all" (Lines 514-17). Conspiracy belief subscribes to a parallel thought process: for every conscious action there is an equally conscious reaction or effect, and thus a sublime event must result from a conscious action or choice. When you kill one of God's sacred beasts, you can expect that God will seek retribution. Yet, despite this perceived law of cause and effect, the process as delineated in the

poem seems to conjure more questions than answers. If the mariner is compelled to impart the lesson of respect towards all creatures, both "great and small," why does "God," or the force that enacts retribution, kill the mariner's shipmates – those who bear no direct responsibility for the crime? Why not kill the mariner and leave the shipmates to impart the lesson? More importantly, if this is a tale of causality – of action and consequence – why do the arbiters of the death ship seem to leave the ultimate fate of the mariner up to chance: "the twain were casting dice; / 'The game is done! I've won! I've won!'" (196-97)? If this was a cautionary tale of order and reason, would not the punishment be clear, predetermined, and unequivocal? Why should it be left to the random chance of the rolling dice? It leads one to consider whether the mariner's "curse" was not actually divine retribution, but instead the result of the mariner's attempt to make meaning of the precarious nature of a dangerous and unforgiving ocean. Although the mariner imparts his lesson in no uncertain terms, the wedding guest to whom he tells his unfortunate tale is left "stunned / And is of sense forlorn: / A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn" (522-25). The wedding guest is left confused and dejected, hardly the comforting effect one would expect from "wise" causal knowledge. This response seems to indicate that he interprets the mariner's story quite differently than the mariner himself; the story seems to indicate a world shaped by chaos and meaninglessness rather than order. In a poem that, at first glance, imparts a lesson of moral consequence, Coleridge instead seems to be considering whether the attempt to find causality in the sublime imparts a more meaningless existence than the acceptance of the sublime's unobtainable and tumultuous nature.

In his analysis of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, William Christie notes:

> The only certainty about the "moral" of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is that there is a deeply human compulsion to find a moral in events that ultimately resist moralisation—just as they resist other kinds of explanation and resolution. Through its search for meaning, Coleridge is able to explore the nature of and need for authority—critical, moral, religious. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is about interpretation, but not just in the sense of finding or discovering meaning and value in the face of meaninglessness and arbitrariness. It is also about interpretation in the sense of making meaning and value in the face of meaninglessness and arbitrariness. (129)

Coleridge seems to consider the perceived goal in questioning the sublime: is it to achieve an understanding, or a transcendence in the acceptance of the sublime? The mariner's goal, much like that of conspiracy theorists, is to use imagination to make sense of a traumatic and terrifying sublime experience. It seems that Coleridge uses the mariner as an example of how one can falter on the path toward transcendence, becoming stuck in a cycle of meaningless meaning-making. Instead of accepting the precarious nature of the sea, the mariner and the shipmates constantly try to decipher the design of cause and effect. At first, the killing of the albatross is perceived as a dark omen, that is, "[u]ntil a change of circumstance—a change in that notoriously unpredictable element in all our lives, the weather—renders the bird's spiritual status equivocal. The credulous crew is bound to associate the renewed beneficence of God, signaled in the change of weather, with the slaughter of the albatross contiguous with it, and to congratulate the Mariner on his ritual sacrifice" (Christie, 123). This constant shifting of meaning shows that the mariner and his shipmates, much like conspiracy theorists, are stuck in the fruitless cycle of finding meaning in the meaningless. Yet, similar to Wordsworth's theory on the sublime process, this does not

necessarily relegate those stuck in the cycle outside the perimeter of the sublime sphere, but merely suggests that they are unable to fulfill subliminal transcendence. It is in this stagnation that we find a semblance of the Romantic sublime in conspiracy belief, in that they are experiencing it, yet have not reached the culmination that Wordsworth and Coleridge theorized. Yet, despite Coleridge's and Wordsworth's views on the procedural role of inquiry, Blake perceived the act of questioning the sublime – and subsequently the answers gained – as the main goal, and an important function of the paramount administrator of reality: the imagination.

Much like the mariner and his shipmates in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Blake questions the design and morals of the sublime. Unlike the cycle the shipmates find themselves stuck in, however, Blake believed that the imagination *can* in fact provide clarity and understanding. In Blake's "The Tyger," the last stanza ends with a question:

> Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy symmetry? (Lines 21-24)

Blake ends the poem in much the same way that he starts, asking who would "[d]are frame thy symmetry?" (Line 24). It is important that it ends with the same question with which it starts, because it seems to establish a continuous inquiry throughout the poem that does not – contrary to what Wordsworth and Coleridge believed – lead to a simple acceptance of the sublime, but a desire to find answers. Blake believed that the imagination was the source of all existence, and that by embracing its power the world can be understood. Unlike other Romantic philosophers

who took solace in the transcendental state gained by accepting the mysteries of the sublime, Blake, as Weiskel notes, was not satisfied with the unknown: “Blake's enmity to the inscrutability which always attends the numinous could not be more extreme” (7). In this way, both conspiracy theorists and Blake seek to understand the sublime through imaginative inquiry, to understand the inherent mystery and chaos of the sublime. Furthermore, there is a strong desire to understand the morality of sublime events. Blake’s inquisitive refrain – “What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy symmetry?” – therefore is not an assent to the indeterminant nature of the sublime, but the first step in attempting to determine the unequivocal truth: asking a question.

A 2016 study found evidence to support the idea that conspiracy belief assigns agency to events that have no reasonable explanation: the “findings therefore suggest that conspiracy theorizing may partially be a consequence of a specific thinking style – assuming that events have an underlying intentional cause when they most likely do not” (Douglas, Karen M., et al, 72). This “specific thinking style” strives to find meaning and relieve the uneasy absence of rationality; conspiracy theorists can achieve peace of mind by explaining sublime events. In relation to the sublime events of the Sandy Hook massacre, one prominent conspiracy theorist said: “I feel good, because I really feel deep inside my heart that no children died that day” (Wiedeman, 8). Although Sandy Hook and 9/11 are undoubtedly of human design, in that they were carried out by human beings, the logic and rationality behind such acts are extremely difficult to comprehend. For conspiracy theorists, it is much easier to understand the sublime experience of 9/11 as a false flag event, in which nefarious entities attempted to con the American public into relinquishing control, than to try to understand why a group of extremists hijacked airplanes with the intention to kill thousands of innocent people. As such, the

imagination takes precedence in mitigating the sublime, concocting elaborate explanations that discard the chaotic nature of incomprehensible intentions and replaces them with an easy-to-understand blueprint, in which point A can be logically seen to lead to point B.

Blake seems to demonstrate the desire for answers and structure when he questions the terrifying and sublime nature of a Tiger:

> And what shoulder, & what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat,
> What dread hand? & what dread feet?
>
> What the hammer? What the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?
> What the anvil? what dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp? (lines 9-16)

In the first stanza, Blake simultaneously acknowledges the horrid structure of the creature, but also that it was created by a conscious being. This fearful entity, according to Blake, seems to have been created by a god: “What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Lines 3-4). Through this inquiry, one can glean the implications of the correlation between the terrible creature and its creator: the question of God’s morality. If something so terrible exists, could God also be terrible? Why would a loving god create something so horrifying? This relationship between a product and its perceived creator is mirrored in how individuals determine

whether they will subscribe to a conspiracy theory: "Uncertainty leads people to be more attentive to the morality of authorities' actions, which subsequently influences belief or disbelief in conspiracies" (van Prooijen et al, 114). When a confusing and frightening event occurs, it leads many to question those who could be responsible, and subsequently depending on their level of trust in the entities' morality, conspiracy theories will – or will not – be accepted. Like Blake's questioning of god's morality in relation to the terrible "symmetry" of a tiger, during 9/11, conspiracy theorists – those inclined to distrust authority – put the blame of 9/11 on the United States government. Because of previous conspiracy beliefs, the perceived immorality of the government, and "inconsistencies" in official reports, it seemed more probable to conspiracy theorists that 9/11 was planned and orchestrated by the American government rather than by a small group of terrorists living thousands of miles away. This is not to say that conspiracy theorists believe that the "purported" terrorists had better intentions than the government, but that the already established distrust in authority elevated the government as the cogent culprit. After all, there is more comfort in the struggle against the devil you know than in the devil you don't know. Phil Molé echoes this in a 2006 article on the 9/11 truthers, concluding that conspiracy theories "are oddly comforting. Chaotic, threatening events are difficult to comprehend… With conspiracy [theories] that focus[ ] on a single human cause, the terrible randomness of life assumes an understandable order" (41). This "order" works to nullify the more unsettling nature of the sublime: the question of why such a terrible event or being such as the tiger exists. It works to mitigate the otherwise confusing morality of a sublime event into something that makes more sense. Again, the fact that conspiracy theories are outlined with such intricate, exact, and linear explanations is a distinct acknowledgement of the sublime and its frightening implications.

When one can frame a mystery in a way that simplifies it, that centralizes its perplexing origin into a more relatable package, one can begin to find a way to live with it, or even fight against it. Blake seems to do this with the metaphor of the forge, by relegating the tiger's creation to conscious human causality. If a creature could be built in a forge – a human tool that makes order from raw nature – then its unsettling nature could be more easily understood, because it was built with purpose. For conspiracy theorists, events that are deemed morally malignant must have a design, they must be wrought by a nefarious societal force. After all, it is easier to believe that the sublime exists because of corrupt human desires than for it to exist for no discernable reason. Although the terrorists' actions clearly fall into the realm of human design, the intentions behind their actions – to attack American society, indeed the American way of life – is an existentially sublime event to consider. As such, it is much more palatable to consider the elite's never-ending drive toward the consolidation of money and power as an explanation. As Molé says, "Another reason for the appeal of 9/11 conspiracies is that they are easy to understand" (41). Likewise, both Blake and conspiracy theorists give the sublime a structure using the imagination; the mysteries and terror can be accounted for by attributing it to conscious human causality. There is an alleviation of trauma and stress when the chaotic events and actions of the world can be explained, a palpable peace in knowing that there is order to the world.

The Trauma & Fear That Forms & Guides Us

Unfortunately, trauma of one kind or another is something that every human being is likely to face within their lifetime. Whether the trauma stems from the experience of war, physical or emotional abuse, or extreme anxiety, an underlying current of stress creates an

uneasy and unstable environment for the afflicted. For Wordsworth, trauma and stress may have been caused by a changing world, in which he perceived important facets of the individual's soul as being continuously diminished. Wordsworth, it seems, used the unease of the stress and trauma to guide him to a solution, a means to mitigate the perceived implications of a changing zeitgeist. In a similar sense, aspects of the sublime and trauma drive conspiracy belief. Jadeja related his feelings on the relationship between conspiracy belief and trauma: "I know from personal experience and anecdotal observations…that there seems to be some preceding trauma that predates someone's fall down the rabbit hole. For me it was finding out I had ADHD, for others it could be a loss of a job, a relationship, or a loved one." In a 2016 study that found a positive link between conspiracy belief and stress, the authors state that "[b]y simplifying and by linking a series of events in relation to its supposed causes and effects, conspiracy theories may offer seemingly coherent explanations for distressing phenomena" (Swami, Viren, et al., 10). Conspiracy theorists, the researchers seem to indicate, are driven to develop explanations to assuage the potential uncertainty, chaos, and arbitrariness of certain "distressing" events, effectively lessening the severity of stress and trauma such events can cause. They use the imagination to reshape and construct order in a world fraught with disorder. Ultimately, it is a fear of a sublime nature, in which one feels that one has no control over interpersonal or societal events. A world where governments, powerful corporations, and shadowy figures vie for control is a world that is easier to accept, because it exists within the human realm, and therefore is subject to change. Although conspiracy theorists and some Romantic philosophers follow different paths to find harmony, both groups seem to link aspects of their trauma to the sublime nature of life.

Despite their differences, there is one strong sublime-oriented similarity that Romanticism and conspiracy belief share: the sublime plays a part in alleviating a purposelessness, an existential boredom if you will. Weiskel believes that for many Romantic philosophers, "the sublime was an antidote to the boredom that increased so astonishingly throughout the eighteenth century," a "[b]oredom [that] masks uneasiness," for "intense boredom exhibits the signs of the most basic of modern anxieties, the anxiety of nothingness, or absence" (18). In this way, then, the "Romantic boredom" that Weiskel outlines is not simply an existence devoid of fun or enjoyment, but something existential in relation to the human psyche: it is the lack of something fundamental and essential. A similar existential boredom is demonstrated by conspiracy theorists, exemplified by Wolfgang Halbig. An article about the Sandy Hook Hoax conspiracy theory – a theory that Halbig helped to create and perpetuate – shines some light on his state of mind before becoming involved with the movement:

> In a deposition given several months before Sandy Hook as part of a personal-injury lawsuit… [Halbig] testified that losing his job left him depressed and a psychiatrist had prescribed medication to help him deal with his "anger and frustrations" […] and he had spent the past few years looking for something to do … He launched several school-safety consultancies, none of which survived; ran for county commissioner, winning 5.7 percent of the vote; and started writing a movie… He spent considerable time commenting online about an alleged cover-up involving a Photoshopped version of President Obama's college ID. (Wiedeman, 4)

After the loss of his job, Halbig found himself in an environment that was ripe with trauma, and it appears that he felt that he lacked purpose. A 2016 study found that the combination of boredom and paranoia showed a positive correlation with conspiracy belief (Brotherton, 3). It seems likely that Halbig's perceived unjust firing caused him to feel out of control and paranoid that he was being unfairly targeted, thus he attempted to find ways to relieve these feelings. Not long after the Sandy Hook Massacre, Halbig adopted a strong conspiratorial outlook, which finally seemed to give him purpose. This brings to light a strong connection between the Romantic sublime and conspiracy belief: the idea that existential boredom and purposelessness drive one to seek answers. Both movements interact with the sublime to find a solution to their trauma, the "anxiety of nothingness." However, conspiracy belief's reaction to the sublime deviates from many Romantic philosophers when considering the phases of the sublime that Weiskel describes. Although both Romantic and conspiracy belief's trauma is alleviated in the third phase of the sublime, the former is accomplished through the acceptance of the sublime, whereas the latter is accomplished through explaining the sublime. In a 2016 study, researchers demonstrated a link between Need for Cognitive Closure (NFCC) and conspiracy belief. They define NFCC as a "desire for predictability, preference for structure, and intolerance of ambiguity" (Marchlewska, Marta, et al., 110). The sublime makes conspiracy theorists deeply uncomfortable, and explanations must be found to create closure and calm, answers that alleviate purposelessness. The study goes on to speculate that when an event has no easy explanation, when the mysteries outweigh the explanations, "conspiracy beliefs may serve as a map of meaning for those individuals who are determined to get any answer. Under these circumstances, individuals high in need for cognitive closure are likely to seize on salient conspiratorial explanations" (Marchlewska, Marta, et al., 115). In this way, the drive to find answers alleviates

purposelessness; it creates a salve against the stress and trauma caused by lack of control. Thus, for conspiracy belief, transcendence is not found in the acceptance of the sublime and the wholeness induced by the holistic nature of the parts – as it was for many Romantic philosophers – but instead transcendence is found when the parts can be explained, and thus, through this explanation, the whole can be understood. It is in this way that conspiracy belief has strong parallels with Romantic thinking, and that it can be described as a neo-Romantic intellectual phenomenon: although each group's alleviation of trauma through the sublime takes slightly different paths, they both use the sublime to find their respective transcendence.

It's not difficult to sympathize with the unease that sublime events can sometimes cause. It is the same reason why the darkness of night holds a sense of danger, and why we often see faces and figures hiding in the shadows. It is the feeling that at any moment we could be overpowered and that our control could be relinquished to something beyond understanding. It is in this that we see conspiracy belief's desire to consign the sublime to the realm of conscious human causality. This, however, raises many pertinent questions: when do explanations suffice, are they ever sufficient, and is human nature always reductive and thus explainable, or must we accept that our actions are sometimes irrational, arbitrary and sublime in nature? These questions are not easily answered, especially when we consider that any affirmation of our sublime nature seems to preclude our very ability to explain it. Maybe a better question is: irrespective of whether human nature is sublime, rational, or otherwise, are our attempts to analyze and explain it frivolous and pointless ventures? It seems that Romantics philosophers such as Coleridge might suggest that, although we can ask questions and attempt answers, this does not mean that we cannot also accept the futility of the act, and subsequently find a tranquility in the unknown.

It is in this seemingly contradictory consideration of the sublime that conspiracy belief can be classified as neo-Romantic in nature. Acknowledging and denying the sublime is a cognitive dissonance of two beliefs that seem at war with each other but follow a linear process: 1) acknowledge the ineffable sublime; 2) attempt to explain it. Without the former, the latter could not exist. Thus, it is the fear of the implications of the sublime – the lack of human agency and the intractable quality of nature – that drives conspiracy belief to alleviate the trauma of such an existence. Although this form of transcendence deviates from the exact process that Wordsworth perceived, there is paradoxical harmony in the dissonance: the terrible and awe-inspiring experience of the sublime becomes a lynchpin in alleviating existential stress and allows the two movements to find their own unique form of transcendence.

CHAPTER THREE

The Individual's Fight for Truth & Freedom: Romantic Individualism in Conspiracy Belief

> Individualism may at first seem a negative concept, and to an extent, of course, it is. But the term should connote more than mere eccentricity, whether social or intellectual. Both Romantic poets and their heroes were isolated from the society of their day; they were all in some degree rebels and outsiders. (Thorslev, 17)

For much of the history of the modern Western concept of *individualism*, the term "individual" was used in a pejorative sense. Some early nineteenth-century critics believed that individualism prioritized the individual's ego above all else. As Koenraad Swart explains, critics such as Vicomte de Bonald believed that individualism diminished a person's responsibility to society (78). Swart notes that opinions on individualism were divided even within the Romantic community; some German Romantics, such as Novalis and Adam Muller, would come to see Romantic Individualism as something that "might degenerate into a quest for eccentricity," warning their contemporaries that "the emphasis on individual development might lead to egotism and impair the sense of social responsibility" (83). Others fully embraced the ideology of individuality. Romantic poet George Gordon Byron, for instance, extolled individualism as a life-affirming celebration of the talents of the individual; for Byron, it was through individualism that one was able to see society in its pure state: that is, as tyrannical and oppressive. Byronic

individualism was embodied in the figure we have come to know as the "Byronic hero": a contemplative, nomadic, and lonely personage who has a keen eye for the corruptions and crimes of society. Romantic individualism, however, was not precisely the desire to abscond from society, but rather the desire for unity with nature as it exists both within and outside the mind. Far from being simply antisocial, the Romantic individual was temperamentally, politically, and philosophically opposed to the kind of technocratic society that inhibited "greater harmony and unity in social relations" (Swart, 82). In other words, individualism was opposed to society's tendency to define and limit one's potential through the pressure of culture and groupthink. Romantic individualists defined themselves against rationalist conformists (Swart, 83), the faceless majority that purported to speak for all people. The makeup of society, as Romantic individualists saw it, was far from cohesive and centralized, and was vastly more interesting and beneficial when made up of individuals who followed their natural drives. Furthermore, many Romantics believed that humanity was intrinsically good, but that moral good could only be realized through the power of intuition and free thought. It was when people ceased to follow their nature and instead succumbed to the will of others that corruption and immorality reigned. This vision of society, then, was informed by its parts – individual thinkers – rather than through culture, social pressure, and conformity. Thus, the potential free and moral society formed by individuals was not the intention, but a beneficial byproduct.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's first Romantic philosopher, believed that the United States could realize this social state by using intuition to transcend the normal human condition. In "Self-Reliance" (1841), Emerson proclaims that "[i]t is only as a man puts off from himself all external support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and to prevail" (15). Emerson believed that the "good" inherent in human beings can only be realized through following their

intuition. This belief was a foundational concept of Emersonian Transcendentalism, which Justin Corfield defines as a belief in "the essential unity of all creation, an innate goodness of man, and the supremacy of insight over logic" (1). Interestingly, Emerson's work in "Self-Reliance" was more than just a philosophical declaration, it was also a defense against his detractors. When Emerson began writing "Self-Reliance," he had already faced backlash over several of his public speeches regarding transcendentalism and individualism, and the "strident defense of individualism in 'Self-Reliance' is the result of Emerson's first prolonged exposure to public censure" (Richardson, 300). "Self-Reliance," then, can be considered a text on individualism that was also partly inspired by experiencing the ignominy that society inflicts on individualists. This experience, however, amongst its difficulties, had an edifying effect on Emerson: "it tended to radicalize Emerson to a larger extent than before. It established him … as a spokesman for unorthodox reform ideas, and led to the development on his part of a greater personal self-reliance when confronting head-on the displeasure of society" (GouGeon, 565). For Emerson, the backlash reaffirmed his belief that society attempts to shame and dissuade individuals for practicing and benefiting from intuition, a theme we will see played out numerous times throughout this chapter.

In the twenty-first century, conspiracy belief follows an uncannily similar – although admittedly more ideologically extreme – philosophical pattern to the one that Emersonian individualism once did: conspiracy theorists detest groupthink; they prioritize intuition; and they derive a sense of moral and epistemological superiority from a view of themselves as perennial outsiders. Conspiracy theorists, however, see themselves as existing in a more intentionally deceptive and nefarious society. They believe that the "deep state"—"shadowy and powerful antidemocratic cabals that threaten popular rule" (Michaels, 2)—clandestinely weaves every

societal thread for the benefit of the elite. According to conspiracy theorist, author, and ufologist Kevin Randle, this nefarious group connives "to retain power, to increase the personal wealth of those on the inside, and to manipulate the media to bring about a desired result that might not be in the best interests of the United States" (3). It's easy to empathize with conspiracy theorists' fear of the deep state, for if it did exist, the implications for personal freedoms would be devastating, especially for those who seek to fight against the deep state. Through this mindset, conspiracy belief positions itself in strong opposition to this perceived looming threat, presenting themselves as staunch individualists, especially when contrasted with the "sheep" of society, the docile masses who are seemingly indifferent to their bondage. As former conspiracy theorist Jitarth Jadeja conveyed to me through online correspondence in April 2022, conspiracy theorists "think they are … the epitome of an individualist; paragons of individual identity." And part of this "individual identity" is manifested in relation to the deep state, believing themselves to be the enlightened few who can fight against it.

As individualists, conspiracy theorists actively resist any perceived control over their freedom and autonomy. To practice conspiracy belief – an ideology that privileges alternate explanations of historical events – is to separate oneself from the collectivist mind. This allows conspiracy theorists, as they see it, to achieve true alterity. In other words, to practice conspiracy belief is to individualize oneself by way of intuition. Yet, conspiracy theorists are not solely responsible for their individualization; a scornful and dismissive society also plays a part. Thus, a vicious circle is created. Conspiracy theorists are further individualized, or backed by society against a wall of their own intuition, when they are subsequently ostracized for their beliefs. This mirrors what Emerson experienced when he questioned the prevailing belief system of societal elites. In the same way that this experience pushed Emerson further into his beliefs, conspiracy

theorists are radicalized by society's disapprobation. As we will see, conspiracy belief's tortured relationship with majoritarian thought and its strong emphasis on the individual's intuition as a counter-discourse to conformist explanations of historical events expose its neo-Romantic underpinnings.

Emerson: Parallels with Conspiracy Belief

One of the most common and foundational themes within conspiracy belief is that the truth is hidden by nefarious entities. This dominance and suppression of "truth" can come in many forms – from misdirection to half-truths to coverups – but regardless of what form it takes, the perceived intention of these entities is invariably to inhibit free thought. Conspiracy author Jerome Corsi exemplifies this: "The hard-left and the Deep State share a concern to expand statist control of a multinational corporate 'one world government' welfare state that controls people from a cradle-to-grave reality" (120). As conspiracy theorists like Corsi see it, society is always on the attack. The source of Emerson's individuality did not necessarily emanate from a threatening society, but from his desire to follow intuition uninhibited; he defines intuition as "at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct" (8). He goes on to write: "We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition […] the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin." Emerson believed that intuition drove individuals to realize their innate goodness, and because of this he denounced anything that might interfere with its process, such as group-thought, government, tradition, and other manifestations of social control. This emphasis on the emotional nature of the individual is part of what made Emerson an authentic Romantic philosopher. Jacob Wolf reminds us that "Emerson, in his most speculative and abstract moments, claimed to act as 'seer' rather than

philosopher, eschewing strict and rationalistic metaphysics" (253). In a similar way, conspiracy theorists "are associated with an intuitive-experiential thinking (processing style)" that declines "to appraise evidence, experiences and thoughts to critical analytical-rational processing" (Dagnall, 10). Thus, conspiracy theorists and Emerson would likely agree that there is an inherent tendency within society and culture to pressure individuals to abandon their free and uninhibited nature. Transcendentalist researcher Robinson Woodward-Burns captures Emerson's thoughts: "Self-reliance requires acting for self-derived reasons rather than coerced or imitative ones. The self-reliant individual 'acts from himself,' not from others" (40). In this way, the pressure to conform was largely internal and up to the individual. Emerson believed that when one succumbed to social pressure and ignored intuition, one *allowed* the inhibition to occur. Conspiracy belief, however, sees the outside pressure as an intentional external force, a deliberate attack on the self, designed to control minds through lies and manipulation. Despite this important distinction, both perceive the corrupting nature of society and believe it to be detrimental to the individual's potential.

In the early nineteenth century, Emerson became an important proponent of America's need to find its own identity. Kenneth Sacks, a scholar of American Transcendentalism, expounds Emerson's views on contemporary America's intellectual plight:

> [H]umans in their primordial state had been fully integrated morally and intellectually. Evolving social and economic tasks caused them to splinter into specialized identities—the farmer, tradesman, priest, attorney, mechanic, or sailor…Those who were once true scholars have become in the current divided state merely thinkers. It is the American scholar's responsibility to restore to the original condition "Man Thinking." (15)

Emerson believed that the toxic influence of slavery, myopically focused professional cultures, and an ever-expanding government threatened America's ability to follow intuition and reach humankind's ethical zenith. To achieve true freedom, Americans as individuals – not "specialized identities" – must look inward and embrace the natural sway of their character. Only then could America culminate in a just and free society. His numerous speeches and works, such as "Self-Reliance," were partly a means to initiate a kind of course-correction. Through "expressive individualism," the idea "that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed" (Bellah, et al, 333–34), Emerson believed that America could fulfil its potential. One of the first steps in practicing this kind of individualism, Emerson explained, was to disconnect from the influence of society and its objects of control: "And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance" (Emerson, 15). Emerson was not against property per se, but believed that:

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. [Society] loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (3)

In other words, the more one was beholden to society and its institutions, the less one was beholden to oneself. Society has the effect of corrupting the self by cannibalizing potential individuals for society's "benefit," and thus exists as a detrimental force for the individual. In

conspiracy belief, this limiting force often manifests through the perception that the media intentionally manipulates truth and fact:

> The hard-left's manipulation of the mainstream media involves more than a shared ideological world view. Mirroring the hard-left, the mainstream media favors a statist view of politics that seeks to extend massive government regulation over every aspect of life, ranging from issues debated in cultural wars to all aspects of the economy and international trade. (Corsi, 120)

Both Emerson and conspiracy theorists, then, recognize that by severing the influence of outside forces – by embracing intuition – the individual can utilize their inherent knowledge, their natural ability to guide themselves toward what is good, correct, and truthful. Without this disconnection, one is simply at the whim of others, making one's passions and interests like a feather in the wind. Emerson likened the use of intuition to the natural proclivities of children:

> The nonchalance of boys… is the healthy attitude of human nature. How is a boy the master of society; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict… Ah, that [an adult] could pass again into his neutral, godlike independence! (3)

Like many Romantic thinkers, Emerson believed that if adults could channel the perspective of a child, they could "observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted

innocence, [and] must always be formidable" (3). Society, therefore, as both conspiracy theorists and Emerson see it, is anathema to intuition and freedom. Society can only hold power by mitigating intuition, because the true individual is not concerned with "the world's opinion" and is thus immune to the influence of the masses (Emerson, 4). Corsi explains what would happen if the masses overtook the autonomy of the individual: "[t]he losers would be patriots 'clinging to their Bibles and their guns,' dumb enough to believe even today in the US Constitution and the freedoms our Founding Fathers bequeathed to all subsequent generations of Americans" (x). This example also demonstrates conspiracy belief's perceived struggle against the pressure and castigation imposed by society and the deep state.

One ostensible difference between conspiracy theorists and Emerson is the viewpoint on culture and tradition. Emerson considered culture and tradition as mechanisms of society's need to constrain the individual. Many conspiracy theorists, by contrast, present themselves as advocates of culture and tradition. Although this appears to be a major discrepancy, it is important to understand how conspiracy theorists define the culture and tradition they are protecting. They believe that the "perfect" and free society that Emerson foresaw exists (or did until recently) and is currently under attack by the deep state: "Trump must end this leftist monster, firing bureaucrats by the thousands and closing departments pursuing their own ideological agendas" (Corsi, xii). As conspiracy belief perceives it, it is the culture and tradition of individual freedom that these "bureaucrats" and "ideological agendas" are attacking. So, whereas Emerson foresaw the possibility of a society of individuals, conspiracy theorists might say it is this *exact* society that they are nostalgically trying to protect. If we prioritize Emerson and conspiracy theorists' predominant focus – the freedom of the individual – then we understand that they envision the same society, one that is only separated temporally by the

conception of the *potential* to the *actual*. Thus, the goal is the same: the proliferation of the individual and their ability to practice intuition and free thought without society's influence.

Persecution by Society: The Modern Byronic Hero

In contrasting the Romantic era to the one preceding it, Peter. L. Thorslev recognized that the Augustan age "could and did produce great literature… but generally speaking it did not produce heroes, for there is always something of rebellious individualism, of pride, of hubris, about heroes. In the full bloom of the Romantic age, however, these were no longer cardinal sins: they had become instead the cardinal virtues" (16). The Romantic movement was in part, then, a rebellion against the moral supposition that pride and individualism were shameful traits, and against the idea that a human's worth and moral measure emanated only from what they could supply to society. Many Romantic poets and philosophers, such as Byron, saw their artistic talent as a vessel for a greater and more meaningful truth, and "considered themselves alienated, isolated from society because of their greater sensibilities[;]… so also they alienated and isolated their heroes" (Thorslev, 18). It was in this context that Byron's heroes – the archetype of which would later become known as the "Byronic hero" – were born. Byron's heroes are varying, but they are often victims of society and manifest their trauma in a reflective and brooding manner, critical of the society that wronged them. And, although they are rebellious and defiant, they also "invariably appeal to the reader's sympathies against the unjust restrictions of the social, moral, or even religious codes of the worlds in which they find themselves" (22). In this way, Byronic heroes were often persecuted for their crimes against a society from which they felt increasingly disconnected.

By its very nature, conspiracy belief also requires a kind of disconnection from prevailing society. But for one to truly disconnect, one would have to live like a hermit, completely isolated from any potential interpersonal and societal influence. Emerson admits the difficulty in escaping societal influence: "I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent man and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right" (4). Yet, physically, it is not practical to live completely outside the boundaries of society and its influence. Thus, for most conspiracy theorists, this separation is of a mental sort; it is a conscious disconnection from psychological participation in a society deemed intrusive and restrictive. Therefore, conspiracy theorists have a passive-aggressive relationship with society, in which they simultaneously exist in and outside of its boundaries. Although this might seem paradoxical and disingenuous, Byron might attest that this liminal existence gives one clout and a unique opportunity for insight. J. Michael Robertson indicates that Byron's unique placement in aristocratic society in conjunction with his individuality allowed him to expose the truths of his class: "by confirming his aristocracy, Byron guarantees the truth of what he is saying about the aristocratic world… he alone as 'rebel' aristocrat possesses that truth" (653). So, much like Byron's place in society, conspiracy theorists – in their neither-in-nor-out position – believe that they have a unique insight into the society in which they exist. Yet, much like the public backlash Byron received in his later years – especially for controversial works such as *Don Juan* (1819–24), "which attacked the institutional foundations of established authority" (Luke, 203) – conspiracy theorists are shunned by society because of their criticism of and detachment from it, leading to a kind of societal persecution. Religious scholar Asbjørn Dyrendal explains that "those ascribing to conspiracy beliefs are often judged on the marginality or even rarity of their beliefs" (153). In this way, the ignominy

inherent within conspiracy culture is both self-imposed – as an accepted repercussion for walking the "noble" path – and inflicted by a society scorned. Despite this, conspiracy theorists often consider public and interpersonal shame an affirmation of their ideals: when society lashes back, it says more about society, they believe, than it does about the conspiracy theorist.

Yet, emotionally, conspiracy theorists realize that their path is a lonely one. Thorslev describes this aspect of the Byronic hero as seen in works like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18):

> [The Byronic Hero is] morbidly analytic of his own emotional and spiritual states, and in his *Weltschmerz* longing for some engagement to absolute truth which will rid him of his painful self-consciousness; longing to "mingle with the universe," but being continually frustrated in this desire by the reassertion of his skeptical, sometimes cynical, and sometimes remorseful ego. (141)

Like the Romantic depression described in Chapter One, the freedom of seeing the truth of reality is a double-edged sword: it establishes walls that separate those cursed by knowledge from those still ignorant of society's shortcomings, e.g. friends, family members, and social structures. This, however, does not distract conspiracy theorists from their enlightenment. They believe that what they fight for is worth the persecution:

> The oppositional nature of the cultic milieu encourages groups and networks to take a sectarian stance, creating social and conceptual boundaries between "us" and "them"—those on the outside. Ideological or religious narratives often create a hierarchy in this

> division, where "us" is good, right, or even spiritually or supernaturally superior, and "them" is negative, wrong, bad, or even evil. (Dyrendal, et al, 153)

As true individuals, they must suffer for those who have not seen the truth, persisting under the aegis of freedom against subversive and malicious entities. In this way the Byronic hero – like the conspiracy theorist – "has a strong sense of honor, and carries about with him like the brand of Cain a deep sense of guilt" (Thorslev, 8). Paradoxically, despite their isolation from society, conspiracy theorists are not misanthropes; their fight is not against humanity, but for it. They believe they fight for the freedom of all good and just individuals.

Harold, of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* suffers from a similar persecution mania caused by his vexed relationship with the corrupt society in which he lives. He travels through society, sullenly observing the monuments and ruins of human transgression. He is "set apart from other men, alienated from the social world of which he would otherwise gladly be a part" (Thorslev, 137). Thus, Harold suffers ignominy on the fringes of society as a result of his adversarial nature, yet his pride persists, and he remains unwaveringly confident that his observations are just. Like conspiracy belief, Harold maintains a passive-aggressive attitude toward a society that he vilifies yet cannot escape, suffering a paradox without resolution. Toward the end of the poem, one can see the effects of the disgrace imposed upon him, and subsequently his prideful retort:

> The deep prophetic fulness of this verse,
> And pile on human heads the mountain of
> my curse!

> …That curse shall be forgiveness…
>
> Have I not had to wrestle with my lot?
> Have I not suffered things to be forgiven?
> Have I not had my brain seared, my heart
> riven,
> Hopes sapped, name blighted, Life's life
> lied away? (IV, sts. 134-35)

Harold does not succumb to his detractors, but to the grief and anger caused by his struggle. His knowledge has stigmatized him; those still a part of society defend the social structures he exposes. He foresees a reckoning of sorts, in which his detractors will finally realize their ignorance. Instead of reciprocating the shame, he defiantly proclaims a "prophetic" curse of forgiveness against them. As such, an ever-prideful Harold suffers from the Romantic depression that he defiantly refuses to – and cannot – abandon. Likewise, conspiracy theorists' vision of a corrupt society also functions to "brand" them:

> [C]onspiracy beliefs are closely tied with notions of marginality and stigma. Stigmatised knowledge is, as it says, stigmatising; such narratives are generally rejected by "them," the majority who are likely to reject anti-hegemonic narratives as conspiracy theory. Thus "conspiracy theorist" is a stigmatising label that functions to defame and denounce

> someone as "other" and less rational (hence less worthy)—even ridiculous, while affirming the collective of the majority. (Dyrendal, et al, 154)

This pride-inducing stigma can be seen when Corsi acknowledges and appropriates a pejorative term for Trump supporters and conspiracy theorists: "the so-called *basket of deplorables* [emphasis added] are yet a formidable force" (xii). "Basket of deplorables" is a term coined in 2016 by Hillary Clinton – a perceived member, indeed, embodiment, of the deep state – for "half" of Trump supporters. This persecutorial term has the effect of rallying conspiracy theorists against the deep state and confirming their righteous cause: "[w]e patriots must today resolve that we are once again the last, best hope to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States and fundamental freedoms we have been bequeathed as Americans" (Corsi, xii). Harold delineates the Romantic connection to conspiracy theorists' belief that society will attack those that question it:

> Meantime I seek no sympathies, nor need;
> The thorns which I have reaped are of the
> tree
> I planted,—they have torn me, and I bleed:
> I should have known what fruit would
> spring from such a seed. (*Childe Harold*, IV, sts. 10)

Corsi and other conspiracy theorists thrive on this injustice, using it to affirm their cause and move forward with purpose. The antagonistic nature of conspiracy belief is its genesis and its

perpetuation, for if society relented to conspiracy theorists' beliefs, their struggle would dissipate: the corruption of society would no longer have power over the masses, and there would be no reason to fight. It is in this struggle and fixation on persecution with which conspiracy belief sustains itself, thriving "on the dialectics of distrust, stigmatization and conflict" (Dyrendal, 144).

The twenty-first-century conspiracy theorist, then, operates much like a modern Byronic hero, an individual cut off from the society in which they exist. They suffer the shame of their peers, but instead of succumbing, they use the stigma as a badge of honor, indeed, confirmation that they are punished because of the truth they expose. In the face of this adversity, however, the Byronic hero's righteous resolve is unwavering, and they move forward against a seemingly insurmountable force. Much like their precarious place in the bounds of society, they exist in a self-perpetuating cycle of shame and pride, in which – unless society sees the error of its ways – there can be no resolution.

Science/Media Hegemony & The "Ousted" Class on the Fringes

The Romantic freethinker Henry David Thoreau, who was inspired by Emersonian individualism, rebelled against his own conformist education: "[his] college studies became even more barren and fatuous than before. He longed to become a guest at nature's festival… rather than to follow his classmates into the beaten groove of custom" (Madison, 110). He believed that the groupthink instilled by educational institutions robbed people of their validity as individuals: "There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived" (Thoreau, 14). This is echoed by how conspiracy theorists perceive science and media

in the modern era. How can truth exist without freedom of thought? If dissenting ideas and theories are quelled before they are considered – if the nature and drive of the individual is snuffed out – then does science really align with its inquisitive spirit? As Emerson stated, history is shaped by individuals, not governments, institutions, or society: "A man Caesar is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius… An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" (Emerson, 7). Similarly, conspiracy theorists feel that science and media lack the individuals necessary to transcend, and further, that these institutions' existence relies on the destruction of the individual.

Although many conspiracy theories deal with world-historical events, there are those that refute widely accepted scientific theories and experts. Julie, a conspiracy theorist featured in a 2015 case study, expresses her frustrations regarding "expertise" and her individual knowledge:

> It's all like: "I have studied, I am a doctor, I know more than you, so I will enlighten you. You are a layman." So already from moment A there's a hierarchy, and they just instruct you to have your baby vaccinated, because well, that's procedure. So I said, "listen, I've done my own research and I have this and that consideration." And the nurse at the clinic just sits there and does exactly what she's learned to do: just copy and paste. (Harambam et al, 475)

Julie feels that it is not just *a doctor,* or *a nurse* who is against her, but the entire medical establishment. The medical professionals, rather than consider the individual's intuitive and experiential knowledge, simply do what they've "learned to do," or, as a conspiracy theorist might suggest if pressed, what they've been brainwashed to do. Although one might assume that

conspiracy theorists are anti-science because they question scientific consensus, this is usually not the case. Many conspiracy theorists would likely say that they are emphatically pro-science. This is because it is not the concept of science that is in question, but the perceived intellectual hegemony enacted by scientific institutions. The same suspicion is at the heart of the distrust in the mainstream media. Conspiracy theorists are deeply suspicious of the motives and endeavors of these institutions, and thus the objectiveness of their conclusions. As Harambam et al note:

> More than merely mimicking modern science in order to augment epistemic authority, conspiracy theorists wish to purify it and reinstall its free spirit of inquiry. Their critique is targeted at the dogmatic nature of scientific assumptions, the authority of scientific institutions, and, indeed, the epistemic and social boundary work performed by scientists to sustain this authority. Science, we may say, is at once sacralized for its intentions but demonized for its manifestations. (477)

Much like Emerson's desire to see intuitive perceptions take precedence over established wisdom, conspiracy theorists believe that science and media institutions lack individual thinkers and the "free spirit of inquiry." These institutions, they believe, perpetuate and reward groupthink and demonize individual intuition and experience.

The demonization of conspiracy theorists has the effect of creating a caste system, with conspiracy theorists at the bottom. Through this lens, the deep state's intentions can be seen as a hostile class takeover. Corsi states that "Hillary Clinton made clear that the Marxist analysis of class conflict in the United States had moved from a 1930s focus championing the working people of the labor union movement to focusing on the oppressed as defined by leftist identity politics" (136). With this perceived shift, or war by the cosmopolitan professional classes on the

working and lower-middle classes, conspiracy theorists believe that they are being systematically and progressively forced into the lower echelons of society. A 2022 study found that

> sociodemographic variables play an important role in determining trust. Trust in institutions is higher for older people, men, and higher social-status people […] showing that people from higher social strata tend to express greater support for the authorities and the system in which they live, as they are the ones who most benefit from it […] [Institutional Trust] is lower for young people, women, and low socioeconomic-status participants […] When people feel less empowered... or anxious... they may more easily develop or accept conspiracy theories. (Mari, Silvia, et al, 293)

Because conspiracy theorists feel that their class status is being diminished, they adopt conspiracy theories to combat science hegemony and to explain their increasingly tenuous socioeconomic position. Teresa A. Sullivan, et al, however, clarify the reality of the middle class: “Since 1969, the structure of male occupational wages has polarized and assumed the shape of an hourglass, with incomes grouped at the top and the bottom, not in the middle. One's position in the hierarchy depends on one's education. The result … has been fewer jobs in the middle for those with modest educational attainments” (31). The idea, then, of an existing middle class seems to take on the role of a myth, since, according to the above quote, the “middle class” has been increasingly shrinking since at least the late 1960s, and in its “hourglass” form it could hardly be said to exist in any meaningful way. Yet, the quote’s more striking takeaway is the idea that education has become an economic barrier between the two distinctive wage disparities. The implication of the deep state conspiracy theory, then, largely becomes a psychological war

of class intellectualism; the deep state is attempting to replace the individualistic middle class with the technocratic class obedient to education and science – cronies and pawns of the deep state.

Conspiracy belief's struggle with individuality in the face of a diminishing class has an interesting parallel to Byron's status within his contemporary society. Byron, as denoted by his title of "Lord," was a member of the aristocracy. Yet, during his early twenties, Byron's wealth was quickly diminishing: "[T]he Byron estate at this time was in financial disarray, and Byron's mother needed to concoct elaborate loans to get her son through" (Heinzelman, 365). Moreover, in later years, Byron struggled with the paradox of his identity as a true poet and his socioeconomic needs: his identity warred between that of the artist who creates poetry for poetry's higher truths (the individual) and that of the artisan poet who creates poetry as a means of economic survival (the poet-conformist). He was able to bridge this gap by realizing that poetry, in a sense, was an intellectual transaction: "[H]e perceives not merely a disparity between his authorial intent and the uses to which his labor is actually put by the [reader;] but he also witnesses the commoditization of his labor into the system of production and exchange that the poem attempted to represent" (Heinzelman, 384). Byron realizes that in the act of sharing his poetry, he creates a transaction with the reader, regardless of whether he writes for poetic truth or otherwise; he has no control over what insights the reader will obtain. Thus, as a poet, he must write for himself, for the sake of truth in poetry. This realization allows Byron to remain an individualistic poet while also giving sustenance to his socioeconomic needs. This struggle has strong parallels to conspiracy theorists attempts to maintain their individualism in a society that rewards and values conformity. And, as will be detailed below, they create their own system that both maintains their individuality, but also allows them, as they perceive it, a competing

intellectualism. Much like Byron, they can have their cake and eat it too. Therefore, they can retain their socioeconomic status – psychologically at least – in the face of a conformist class takeover.

Conspiracy theorists' individualistic proclivities lead them to view themselves as self-made citizens and the backbone of a free society. Yet, they fear that their autonomy is being taken from them. This fear manifests as an attack on their "middle-class" status:

> Part of being middle class in the United States is a set of attitudes and values. Among those attitudes are a strong orientation toward planning for the future, trying to control one's destiny, pulling one's weight, and respecting others who try to get ahead in the same way. […] There is also a well-known set of middle-class fears. Chief among them are the fear of falling from the middle class to a lower class and a fear of being squeezed between a more powerful upper class and a desperate lower class. (Sullivan, 32)

They perceive their success is becoming increasingly defined and operated by technocratic institutions, which relegate "self-made" individuals to the lower classes. These institutions are often perceived as operating under a variation of one (or often as a combination) of two assumptions: 1) The business or institution is corrupt and desires to make money for shareholders – malicious individualists – by any means necessary; 2) The business or institution is controlled by the deep state and vies to consolidate control over the population for the deep state's benefit. Thus the "malicious individualists" conspire to demote the "self-made" middle class, replacing them with conformist technocrats – those who can be controlled through education and political affiliations. In this way, the "malicious individualists" attempt to void

true individualists' ability to interfere; true individuality is a threat to the deep state's ability to control the masses. Corsi demonstrates this belief:

> [T]hese disruptive tactics were not genuine expressions of voter grassroots politics but highly organized events that included coordination with Obama activists at his Organizing for Action (OFA) organization, the successor to Organizing for America, a group that Obama created for his 2008 presidential campaign. The mainstream media presentation of disruptive town hall meetings was designed to convince the public the #NeverTrump movement was large and growing. (131)

Corsi exemplifies conspiracy theorists' belief that both the mainstream media and political organizations are conspiring to control the political narrative and influence the will of citizens, presenting charlatans as everyday people – the "middle class." However, instead of conforming, certain individualists have relied on their own means to combat the new technocratic upper-middle class: through conspiracy theory, they thwart and fight against science and media hegemony. It seems to me that this benefits conspiracy theorists in two ways. First, it allows them to maintain their individuality within their perceived middle-class world: they do not conform to the "group thought" of science and media consensus and retain autonomy over their intuition. And second, it allows them to have, as they see it, a viable means to compete with a technocratic society that is attempting to push them aside. Thus, through a new "science," conspiracy theorists can retain their role as individuals in a society that progressively devalues individualism.

Thoreau also believed that society was constantly infringing on one's status as an individual: "His inherent tendency to shun compromise, shy away from dogma and custom, and seek the truth behind the event had become a rebellious resolve to follow his own bent without regard to the opinion of others" (Madison, 111). When considering the intuitive compass of an individual compared to an institution, Thoreau drew a hard distinction: "It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience" (Thoreau, 3). Thus, like conspiracy theorists' belief that their "middle class" thrived (or once did) on individuals' intuition, Thoreau believed that if individuals worked together, they could make correct decisions. Emerson had a similar understanding of the politics of free thought, believing that when one was inspired by the truth of their own intuition, they could awaken another's intuition without risking coercion: "one can reenter politics self-reliantly, sharing one's moral enlightenment with others in small conversations that avoid the conformity of the mass" (Woodward-Burns, 31). When this is viewed in relation to alternative "scientific" viewpoints, one can see why conspiracy theorists single out dissenting scientists and other renegade thinkers without risking their individuality. In a 2015 study, researchers analyzed participant's reaction to viewing a popular YouTube video that questioned anthropogenic global warming. The study found that "participants who were exposed to the conspiracy video were significantly less likely to think that there is widespread scientific agreement on human-caused climate change" (van der Linden, 171). The video features scientists and professors using us-versus-them rhetorical strategies – individuals vs scientific and media institutions – when discussing popularly accepted scientific concepts. Within the first 45 seconds of the video, one featured "expert" declares: "A few years ago, if you would ask me, I would tell you it's CO2. Why? Because just like everyone else in the public, I listened to what the media had to say" (The

Great Global Warming Swindle, 00:00:20). Soon after, another professor, when referencing the media and scientific community, states, “There is such intolerance of any dissenting voice” (00:00:39). Because these people are presented as individuals going against the tide, their opinions are valued by conspiracy theorists over scientific consensus. This attitude is echoed by Neal, a conspiracy theorist from the case study: “So there was this woman I knew via work. One day she put both her hands on my back. […] The next day I woke up without any pain […] If you experience that first hand… if that is possible, what more may be possible?” (Harambam et al, 472). As Neal sees it, another individual, a “healer” not aligned with the scientific community, was able to fix his back pain. These examples delineate conspiracy theorists’ belief that their explanations are just as viable as the consensus forced upon them. The researchers of the case study go on to elaborate the crux of these feelings: “[E]xperts should not course on their scientific credentials and cultural authority in the treatment of patients. They should have a more open interaction with patients and acknowledge their practical wisdom, subjective feelings, and life experiences” (Harambam et al, 475). Thus, conspiracy theorists see the individual as not only important to maintaining the “spirit” of science, but to the overall freedom of society.

Twenty-first-century conspiracy belief has many strong parallels with early-nineteenth-century Romanticism in terms of its emphasis on the individual’s intuitive experience, as well the belief in the intrinsic corruption of modern society. For many Romantic philosophers and poets – such as Emerson, Byron, and Thoreau – it wasn’t enough to simply acknowledge the disparity inherent within a corrupt society, but to actively resist it through individuality. As paradoxical as it might seem, they believed that only the individual could create a free and just society for all. This same thought process inclines conspiracy theorists to trust the intuition and experiences of other individuals, because they are perceived to also be immune to the groupthink

of society. Interoperable with their efforts to be free from social inhibition is their sense of martyrdom and victimhood, a self-imposed marginalization akin to that of the lonely, self-righteous Byronic hero. Yet, this social marginalization only works to reinforce their conviction that they have penetrated the veil of lies that inhibit their individuality. They wear the mantle of stigma with pride, and walk the persecuted path toward truth, justice, and freedom; after all, their perceived fight is one of an existential nature. If they are to retain their autonomy within their "self-made" class, they cannot conform, but must fight science with "science." Thus, individuality is deeply ingrained in the psyche of conspiracy theorists, and defines what they choose to believe, who they trust, and how they interact with the society that attempts to discredit them. Although the path is admittedly a lonely one, Emerson believed that the individual's self-confidence and resilience can be inspirational and contagious, awakening another individual's natural intuition. In this way, humanity can finally transcend its self-imposed chains and reach a higher state of being: "When good is near you, when you have life in yourself,—it is not by any known or appointed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;—the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude all other being. You take the way from man, not to man" (Emerson, 9).

Conclusion

Emerson believed that his imagination enabled him to experience reality beyond the limits of his physical constraints. As Robinson Woodward-Burns reminds us, he deployed it to understand the plight of the American slave: "[H]is intellect could be 'what it sees,' as Emerson imagined himself in the place of slaves, experiencing enslavement firsthand" (38). Likewise, conspiracy belief relies upon the imagination to construct complicated and rich alternate realities that they believe capture the truth of existence. And although these realities are usually objectively false, we can see them – like the alternate reality game that early Anons created – as unconscious metaphors for their views on human nature, societal institutions, and the individual's role within society. Further, in experiencing the sublime nature of existence – the ability to conceive of the mysterious and the awe-inspiring – conspiracy theorists attempt to find a mechanism to assuage the fear of the unknown. They create a feeling of comfort in an intricately structured human causal world, with the hope and possibility of change. Within this structure, they believe they can see the mechanisms of control and restraint, and with that knowledge comes a second-sight, one that can allow them to reform and restructure their place within society and gain freedom and perpetuate the intuitive individual.

Yet, these same qualities – without the mental discipline and self-awareness that many Romantic thinkers urged – can become negative traits that undermine the individual and harm those around conspiracy theorists. When one loses control over one's imagination, the subsequent disorder can preclude the truth one intends to expose, and reality becomes skewed. It becomes a vicious cycle of delusional ideation, in which the reality of the afflicted is informed by the rabid imagination, rather than imagination by reality. In this destructive state of mind, all

forward motion becomes stagnate, and the "higher truth" is instead replaced with a corrupted truth. This state is made worse by the fact that the afflicted has no knowledge of their diversion from reality. Coleridge warned that existence under the corrupted imagination would be a living nightmare. In this nightmarish reverie, all potential for the intuitive good is lost, and every shadow hides a creeping threat. As Jitarth Jadeja conveyed from his personal experience: "There's always someone in control and…it's always the bad guys. No one ever has a conspiracy about something good." In this way, the sublime can only be conceived of as a nefarious entity of causal retribution, even though, as we see in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the sublime relies on an arbitrary roll of the dice. Neo-Romantic conspiracy belief, then, tends to rely on the unbridled imagination in the interpretation of the sublime, reforming it into an entity of human causality. Although this creates a transcendence of sort, it is one that aims to cure the symptom rather than the ailment itself. It is a subconscious lie that allows one to perceive control over the chaotic and entopic realities of life. In this lie, the hope of control and change exists, but it is a futile hope that aspires to change a reality that may not actually exist, or at least, to change the chaos of nature itself. The unchained imagination, this Romantic depression, can cause one to succumb to some of the most adverse qualities of individualism – misanthropic predilections, paranoia, and the severing of important interpersonal relationships – causing conspiracy theorists to retreat from the comforts and benefits of society. Beyond the loss of interpersonal relationships, one loses out on the possibility of the inspirational intuition that Emerson believed could exist, causing what one perceives as intuition to instead be a symptom of a corrupted Romantic imagination. Thus, the very qualities that the Romantics believed could elevate one to a higher order, could instead be detrimental and destructive, causing one to degrade their existence to one of despondence and anguish. It is true that most conspiracy theorists do not

experience most of these negative consequences, but without proper Romantic restraint, the threat looms in every shadow of society.

Because some of the people who lose themselves in conspiracy belief are our friends, family members, and co-workers, it is important that we do not simply "Other" them as deranged, further alienating them, causing them to embrace the most antisocial and destructive aspects of their neo-Byronic rebellion against modern community. Doing so would only reinforce their beliefs and proclivity for political violence. Thus, demanding (or hoping) that they conform to our dominant narrative of reality is not a viable solution to the problem posed by conspiracy belief. A sweeping call for cognitive conformism, after all, would have the unfortunate effect of pathologizing the potentially life-affirming aspects of their neo-Romantic embrace of "free thought." Perhaps we should rethink our approach. Instead of dismissing conspiracy belief, we should take it seriously as a twenty-first-century expression of Romantic thought, situate it within a larger historical context, and understand its logical fallacies and internal contradictions as symptoms not of the intrinsic danger of neo-Romantic styles of thinking but of incomplete, partial, or aborted Romantic intuitive processes. Perhaps, instead, we should encourage believers in conspiracy theories to lean into their Romanticism, to cultivate the self-reflection, self-doubt, and mental control that many Romantics praised and taught as necessary components of imaginative thinking. Through empathy and our own imaginations, we can appeal to the Romantic tendencies in conspiracy theorists, acknowledging that many aspects of Romantic styles of thinking – when practiced with restraint and self-awareness – are beneficial to society. Imagination, after all, can be a powerful tool for cultural enrichment as well as a tool to inspire empathy. Intuition can be an effective ingredient of intellectual dexterity when combined with discernment and critical thinking. The acceptance of the sometimes chaotic

and uncontrollable quality of nature can be – paradoxically – life-affirming, enabling one to weather the ups and downs of life. And individualism can be exercised by using one's personal strengths to mitigate other's weaknesses, thereby bolstering the rich diversity of human experience. Rather than fueling their cynical spiral to the margins of society, we should be compassionate. We can begin to do this by seeing conspiracy belief through a Romantic lens. If we can find a way to encourage their Romantic restraint and to check their Romantic excesses, there may yet be a positive outcome. Whether this leads to a transcendental oneness with nature and a society of freethinkers remains to be seen, but at the very least, it might lead to a less antagonistic and divided society.

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