

POST-ROMANTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Dickens to Plath

John Beer

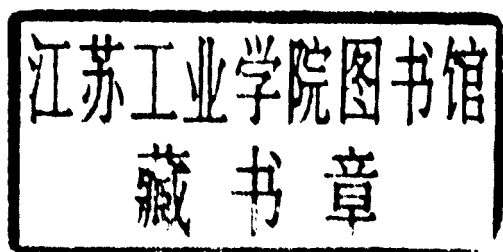


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Dickens to Plath

John Beer

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First published 2003 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 1-4039-0518-5 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beer, John B.

Post-Romantic consciousness: Dickens to Plath / John Beer.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-0518-5

1. English literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Consciousness in literature. 3. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870—Knowledge—Psychology. 4. Plath, Sylvia—Knowledge—Psychology. 5. Subconsciousness in literature. 6. Psychology in literature. I. Title.

PR478.C65B44 2003

820.9'353—dc21

2002044814

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Abbreviations

Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

<i>APrW</i>	Matthew Arnold, <i>Complete Prose Works</i> , ed. R.H. Super (11 vols., Ann Arbor, MI, 1960–77)
<i>APW</i>	Matthew Arnold, <i>Complete Poems</i> , ed. Kenneth Allott; 2nd edn., ed. Miriam Allott (1979)
<i>BE</i>	<i>The Poetry and Prose of William Blake</i> , ed. D.V. Erdman and H. Bloom (New York, 1965)
<i>BK</i>	Blake, <i>Complete Writings, with Variant Readings</i> , ed. G. Keynes, 1957; reprinted with additions and corrections in the Oxford Standard Authors series (Oxford, 1966)
<i>CBL</i>	Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> [1817]; ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, CC, 7 (2 vols., 1983)
<i>CN</i>	Coleridge, <i>Notebooks</i> , ed. Kathleen Coburn (5 vols., Princeton, NJ and London, 1959–2002)
<i>DCED</i>	J. Cuming Walters, <i>The Complete Edwin Drood</i> (1912).
<i>DLN</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. Walter Dexter (Nonesuch edn., 3 vols., 1938)
<i>DLO</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson et al. (Oxford, 1965–2002)
<i>DOED</i>	Dickens, <i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> , ed. Margaret Cardwell: The Clarendon Dickens (Oxford, 1972)
<i>HBL</i>	Ted Hughes, <i>Birthday Letters</i> (1998)
<i>HNP</i>	Ted Hughes, <i>New Selected Poems 1957–1994</i> (1995)
<i>HSGCB</i>	Ted Hughes, <i>Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being</i> (1992)
<i>HWP</i>	Ted Hughes, <i>Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose</i> , ed. William Scammell (1994)
<i>LL</i>	D.H. Lawrence, <i>Letters</i> , ed. J.T. Boulton et al. (6 vols., Cambridge, 1979–)
<i>L Phoenix</i>	<i>Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence</i> , ed. E.D. McDonald (1936)
<i>L Phoenix II</i>	<i>Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works by D.H. Lawrence</i> , ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (1968)

<i>L Record</i>	'E.T.' [Jessie Chambers], <i>D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record</i> (1935)
<i>MP</i>	John Milton, <i>The Complete Poems</i> , ed. B.A. Wright and G. Campbell (1980)
<i>PJ</i>	<i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962</i> , ed. Karen V. Kukil (2000)
<i>PBJ</i>	Sylvia Plath, <i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963)
<i>PJP</i>	Sylvia Plath, <i>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, and Other Prose Writings</i> (1977)
<i>PP</i>	Sylvia Plath, <i>Collected Poems</i> (1981)
<i>SPR</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research</i> (1882–)
<i>VWD</i>	<i>The Diary of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Anne Olivier Bell (5 vols., 1977–84)
<i>VWE</i>	<i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Andrew McNellie (1986–)
<i>VWL</i>	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Nigel Nicolson (6 vols., 1975–80)
<i>WL</i> (1821–53)	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years, 1821–1853</i> , ed. E. de Selincourt; 2nd edn. revd, A.G. Hill (4 vols., Oxford 1978–88)

Preface

In my first volume I discussed a preoccupation to be traced in some English Romantic writers involving the divergence between rational consciousness as it had come to be commonly conceived in the West and a sense of what constitutes the true 'Being' of humanity. I also examined the sense among some of the most characteristic writers in the Romantic period that rational consciousness might need to be subsumed into a larger sense, in which the human might be linked to the divine.

About the middle of the nineteenth century it became increasingly difficult for thinkers to accept this kind of conspectus, as encouraged by Coleridge, Wordsworth and their successors, yet the underlying question raised by a disparity between the worlds created by conscious rational organization and that believed to be inherent in the human unconscious continued to be recognized. From now on, the question of Being became more personally focused, with writers recognizing contradictions within their own experience that could be solved only by reconciling their conscious view of the world with a universe ratified by their own unconscious.

My approach to these questions in the present volume begins in twofold fashion: intensive discussion of a single individual in whom this problem can be seen to be half unknowingly embodied is followed by extensive consideration of an enterprise set up to deal with it in a scientific manner: the setting up of the Society for Psychical Research. In the case of my single individual, Charles Dickens, conflict between a consciously affectionate and benevolent view of the world was increasingly at odds with his unconscious attraction to the criminal and violent. The interest that Coleridge had shown in the alternative modes of consciousness suggested by the phenomena of animal magnetism became a crucial element in his view of the world also, but he still apparently found it difficult to recognize this element of self-contradiction. The resulting internal struggle was, I argue, central to the steadily increasing turmoil of his later fiction and partly responsible for his failure to complete his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

A similar sense of contradiction at the heart of human experience resulted in the early activities of the Society, where it was hoped that rigorous investigation not only of the hypnotic powers that had

fascinated both Coleridge and Dickens but abnormal psychical experiences of all kinds, might complement awareness of the conscious self and lead to further insight into the nature of what it was to be human. In the thinking of F.W.H. Myers, the main focus was upon the question of human immortality; his contemporaries, however, found their strong stimulus in the full range of his thought and that of his friend Edmund Gurney. Myers's postulation of a 'subliminal self' in all human beings suggested another solution to the problem of the relationship between consciousness and Being which William James, in particular, would find extremely profitable. By that time, however, the problem of 'Being' was becoming a widely discussed topic elsewhere. In a further chapter I take some account of the differing versions developed not only by James, but by European thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Havel.

In spite of this wider twentieth-century currency, the early Romantic writers, and notably Coleridge, had given a psychological direction to thinking about the issue that would not easily be lost: Virginia Woolf, in particular, with her 'moments of Being', and Lawrence, with his insistence on the existence of another level of consciousness in which human beings found their true selves, and his tracing of this by way of vital energy and human response to it, both revealed a continuity with this subterranean English tradition. In turn, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes – themselves devotees of Woolf and Lawrence, respectively – would offer in their personal and artistic lives a vivid demonstration of the dialectic involved: Plath displaying the potentialities of a Being that identified itself most readily in motion, even while she exhibited the problems besetting a highly developed consciousness, while Hughes insisted on the importance of the firm, physically rooted identity that was his own version of Being – and which became increasingly his poetic subject as well. In the choice of title for his late study, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes was acknowledging the importance for him of a question that will be seen to have haunted, in their differing ways, all the authors dealt with in these studies.

The material in one or two chapters of this book has appeared previously: some pages on D.H. Lawrence first formed part of an essay contributed to *The Spirit of D.H. Lawrence*, edited by Gāmini Salgādo and G.K. Das, while an earlier version of my work on Dickens was contributed to *Dickens Studies Annual*, XIII. I trust that such uses will make good sense when seen against the background of my larger discussion. In the same way, I am glad to have the opportunity of

quoting from various recent writers, who are still in copyright. I am assured that the use of these brief quotations, taken up into my larger critical discussion, amounts in every case to 'fair dealing'. I am also grateful to Professor Philip Collins and Elaine Feinstein, respectively, for having read and offered valuable comments on earlier versions of my chapters on Dickens and Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Finally, I am again grateful to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, and to the Houghton Library, Harvard, for permission to reproduce or quote from items in their Myers collections and to the Museum Oskar Reinhart am Stadtgarten Winterthur for permission to use the picture by Caspar David Friedrich, 'Chalk Cliffs on Rugen 1818/9', as my dust-jacket illustration.

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1

Questioning Consciousness

In my previous volume I began by citing Antonio Damasio's arguments against the Cartesian '*I think, therefore I am*' and the alternative formulation that he offered:

for us now, as we come into the world and develop, we still begin with being, and only later do we think. We are, and then we think, and we think only inasmuch as we are, since thinking is indeed caused by the structures and operations of being.¹

It is not only scientists who have preoccupied themselves with this question. A point hardly recognized in Damasio's book is that while scientists have made their way towards such a questioning of René Descartes' affirmation, the vulnerability of his position has not escaped the attention of philosophers themselves. It was the twentieth century, after all, that saw the rise of 'existentialism', even if this was seen as peculiarly contemporary in its concern. The philosophers who wrote under its sign did not claim many predecessors apart from Søren Kierkegaard, who saw himself as swimming against the tide of fashion, adopting a position that was essentially anti-Romantic and, in particular, presenting an answer to G.W.F. Hegel. The questions involved in existentialist thought were, as might be expected, notably important in France, where the strong influence of Descartes called for equally powerful counter-arguments, but it also had a significant effect in Europe at large. In England the interest has been more limited. In one of her post-war essays, Iris Murdoch remarked on the fact that the kind of Anglo-Saxon philosophy most fashionable at that time never discussed terms such as 'being' and 'consciousness', even though these questions were at the time being debated urgently by their French contemporaries.²

The achievements of twentieth-century existentialists may be left for later discussion; however; we need comment here only on the degree to which all such debates have continued to be dominated by a philosophy emphasizing the power of rational thought.

The issue is relevant to further modern concerns, such as the question whether it would be possible to devise a computer that could completely replicate the mind of a human being. This is a matter much discussed, and indeed it is to be supposed that at present a record number of people are working on the problem. If the Cartesian formulation is taken literally, it follows that the computer's ability to mime thought would establish its existence as a human substitute. Damasio would presumably argue that the omission of feeling from the formula not only marks the essential gap in Descartes' view, but indicates the central deficiency in any attempt to make a computer which totally reproduces human behaviour. And it seems that such an objection would be supported by some researchers, who would contend that in order to mimic humanity in a satisfactory manner it would not be sufficient to devise a sufficiently subtle network of electronic circuitry; one would also need a biochemical basis. For reasons that have already been adumbrated, however, it can be argued that any simple distinction between reason and emotion neglects the subtlety of the issues involved. Apart from what are normally thought of as emotional factors, there are elements in mental activity itself that cannot easily be replicated artificially. A computer may be programmed to perform acts of recognition – indeed some of its most useful and complex functions can involve just that – but programming it to *initiate* recognition is a more difficult task; it seems clear that some other element is involved. And this lack can be generalized to cover much creative activity in the mind. In problem-solving, computers can make massive contributions, producing a solution with unbelievable speed by investigating thousands of possibilities until an answer that fits the question exactly is found. The human experience of going to sleep and waking up with the answer to a problem unsolved the previous evening may perhaps involve a similar process, continued far into the night, but the possibility remains that sleep involves, rather, the enhancement of unconscious processes that have little to do with multiplex searching. This certainly seems a better account of other creative activities, as in the arts, where the appearance of the best form for a painting, music or a literary work may involve at some point or points the intervention of a 'shaping spirit' which takes over, resembling chemical process in its power to create at every point simultaneously an instantaneous effect of transformation.

In my previous volume I presented a historical dimension to the question by arguing that this sense of a precedent to rational consciousness was something that had been contended for also by various Romantic thinkers, beginning with William Blake, and had been affirmed with particular emphasis by those writing under the sign of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. At the same time, I pointed out, such writers had usually been aware of a metaphysical implication, their conception of Being needing prominently to be related to their idea of the Supreme Being, so that in some sense or other, ranging all the way from Coleridge's Anglicanism to Percy Bysshe Shelley's atheism, the idea of Being had for them a religious (or equally strongly, anti-religious) overtone.

Half a century later, the existence of this apparent consensus was to affect some of the reactions to the publication of *The Origin of Species*. It has increasingly come to be recognized that for many the shock produced by this was not due to a supposed sudden emergence of the idea of evolution. In various forms, that had been at work for a long time. Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin had, in fact, set out such a conception, which had interested some contemporaries through its relationship to contemporary ideas of development. The difference that Charles made was not to introduce the idea as such, but to argue that it did not take the form that was commonly supposed. Whereas the concept of development had not necessarily been unwelcome, suggesting to some Christians a means by which a benevolent creator might have unfolded his purposes, the principle of the survival of the fittest, as authorized by Darwin, seemed to allow little room for such an all-encompassing benevolence.

While the growing acceptance of such modes of thought made it increasingly difficult for thinkers to accept the kind of conspectus that had been encouraged by Coleridge and Wordsworth, they continued to recognize the underlying question raised by a disparity between a world created by conscious rational organization and one which might be less amenable to mental analysis. From now on, the question of Being, which had tended to be studied in a context acknowledging the role of religion, became more personally focused, with writers recognizing contradictions within their own experience that could be solved only by reconciling their conscious view of the world with a universe ratified by their own unconscious. An exemplary figure here is Charles Dickens, in whom the conflict between a consciously affectionate and benevolent view of the world was increasingly at odds with unconscious processes fascinated by the criminal and the violent, and who

(perhaps recognizing this element of self-contradiction) took up the interest in alternative modes of consciousness suggested by the phenomena of animal magnetism that had previously been explored by, among others, Coleridge and Shelley. This internal struggle may be seen as central to the steadily increasing turmoil of his later fiction and – arguably – responsible for his failure to complete his last novel.

As the discussion in the present volume proceeds, a similar sense of contradiction at the heart of human experience will be traced in the early activities of the Society for Psychical Research, where it was hoped that scientific investigation not only of the hypnotic powers that had fascinated Coleridge and Dickens but abnormal psychical experiences of all kinds might lead, as a complement to the activities of the conscious mind, to further insight into the nature of what it was to be human. In the thinking of F.W.H. Myers, the main focus was upon the question of human immortality; his contemporaries, however, found their strongest stimulus from him in the full range of thought both of himself and of his friend Edmund Gurney. Myers' postulation of a 'subliminal self' in human beings suggested another solution to the problem of the relationship between consciousness and Being which William James, in particular, would find extremely profitable. By now, however, the problem of 'Being' had become a widely discussed topic elsewhere: it will be necessary to consider the differing versions found not only in James but in European thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Václav Havel.

It is not only philosophers who have preoccupied themselves with the question, moreover. It has emerged as an issue in recent work on the divided self, and its manifestation in literature: Karl Miller's *Doubles*, for example, and Jeremy Hawthorn's work on multiple personality.³ Hawthorn takes his theme from modern case-histories involving patients who exhibited more than one personality, such as Miss Beauchamp, the classic case reported by Morton Prince,⁴ or the Eve White and Eve Black of *The Three Faces of Eve*;⁵ he shows how similar phenomena can be found in certain texts, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double* onwards, and examines well-known novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Josef Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*. His argument is primarily undertaken from a point of view extending from the private to the public, however: he is particularly concerned with instances where a character develops parallel personalities to cope with the demands of public and private life. A classic example, in his view, is that of Wemmick, in *Great Expectations*, with his 'the office is one thing, private life another'.

When the device of multiple personality is adopted by novelists, it is often to present just this sort of tension. Hawthorne has particularly shrewd discussions of the tension in modern society resulting from the need for human beings to balance self-interest – particularly in their public and commercial dealings – against their need to achieve or maintain a sense of solidarity with others, a tension which, he believes, often manifests itself in the development of dual personalities within the same individuals as a means of ministering to their opposing needs:

if an individual is brought up, and has to survive, in an environment constituted by contradictory systems of value, then he or she will become internally divided unless the external contradictions are clearly recognized.⁶

This is evidently true in many cases, and Hawthorne has little difficulty in showing its validity in cases ranging from *She Stoops to Conquer*, where Marlow expresses the different behaviour required of a man trapped by the double standards of behaviour towards women produced by the presuppositions of his society, to the young Captain in Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, whose dealings with the mysterious Leggatt bring out his own current social anxieties. It should be observed, however, that since individual novelists may well be wishing to bring out the relationship between the private and public concerns of a particular character by way of such a division, their employment of the device in a work of fiction cannot necessarily be universalized as if it were the key to all divided human behaviour.

For the present study, in any case, a different point is to be presented. Multiple personality in the fictions just described is necessarily based on a division between cognate forms of consciousness, as if of separate people. The reason that this cannot accurately represent the division between consciousness and Being is that the latter can never be so separately represented. Being can never be totally and exclusively conscious, even if, for any particular individual, it can only be known, or mediated, by way of a consciousness – which may, indeed, be making its paradoxical appearance at a subconscious level, as in dreams. For this reason we are concerned with something different from what is presented in, say, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where it is not the case that the characters represent different forms of the conscious and the unconscious (even if that is sometimes half hinted at) but rather alternating states of full consciousness – a

phenomenon which often seems to be true also of clinical, as opposed to literary, cases of multiple personality. (Karl Miller points out that dualities of the clinical kind are to be traced as far back as Mesmer, in whom he finds sources for what he terms 'dipsychism' and 'poly-psychism'. He does not remark, however, the part played by the very different factors just mentioned.)

Hawthorn recognizes that in cases of multiple personality we are dealing with a phenomenon that has been recognized only recently, maintaining that to provide a full account the whole discussion we should need to return to previous ages. He draws particularly on the work of the Soviet writer A.S. Luria, whose *Cognitive Development* traced the emergence of the subliminal self to a problem in the acquisition of what he calls the 'higher mental activities'.⁷ Luria compared the mental states of a group of illiterate peasants and one of 'farm activists', noting the remarkable development of ability in self-analysis between the two, and thus encouraging Hawthorn's conclusion that the latter depends on the growth of literacy. This would help explain the belatedness of its appearance. So long as the majority of mankind was living in simplicity of character, it might be held, there was much less need to recognize such different components of human consciousness.

Hawthorn also follows Luria in maintaining that 'self-awareness' is 'a product of socio-historical development' – a plausible view provided that one accepts the reverse as well: that socio-historical development has its own dependency on the growth of self-consciousness in the population. His final conclusion that only by establishing a society that is undivided, in a world that is undivided, can there emerge human individuals free from hypocrisy and duplicity',⁸ admirable as it may be in sentiment, seems to fall short of recognizing that in the development of self-consciousness 'duplicity', at least, is necessarily involved. So true is this that it played a part in one of the best-known formulations of recent times, the so-called 'Dissociation of Sensibility', making its first appearance in T.S. Eliot's proposition that 'in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation ... was aggravated by the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden'.⁹ He never, apparently, repeated the terms of his formulation or even fully reasserted it, being indeed somewhat embarrassed by the currency which they gained. Twenty-five years later, he produced a modified version:

the general affirmation represented by the phrase 'dissociation of sensibility' ... retains some validity; but I now incline to agree with

Dr Tillyard that to lay the burden on the shoulders of Milton and Dryden was a mistake. If such a dissociation did take place, I suspect that the causes are too complex and too profound to justify our accounting for the change in terms of literary criticism.¹⁰

Eliot remained fairly sure, in other words, that his distinction had been significant, yet had come to suppose that it was of a kind that could not be accounted for in terms of poetic history alone. A similar point has been made by John Needham, discussing both Eliot and Richards. He draws attention to the essay on A.C. Swinburne in which Eliot sets up an antithesis between him and John Dryden, declaring that Swinburne's words are 'all suggestions and no denotation; if they suggest nothing, it is because they suggest too much. Dryden's words, on the other hand, are precise, they state immensely, but their suggestiveness is often nothing'.¹¹

Although the mention of Dryden alongside Milton in the original assigning of responsibility for the 'dissociation of sensibility' idea justifies considering this passage, it may be noted that Eliot is here talking not about feeling but about suggestiveness – which may or may not be the same. Where Eliot's original assertion is undoubtedly to the point is in his identification of John Donne and similar poets as managing to fuse thought and feeling in their writing. It might have been more accurate, however, to assert that during a certain period there had existed an *association* of sensibility in the writings of particular poets, of whom Donne and his school were outstanding examples. He would not have been likely to argue either for or against the proposition that Donne lacked feeling. (His statement that Dryden lacked suggestiveness ranges wider; it is also one that veers towards the affective, taking account of the effect on the reader rather than the nature of what is being expressed. This is fully in line with his general position, which is always concerned with objective elements in art rather than subjective.)

In general the term 'dissociation of sensibility' is open to the objection concerning Damasio's theories raised in my previous volume. It suggests that there are two positive and equivalent forces at work in human beings which, by being separated, cause a damaging split. Whatever the truth of such a position in terms of reason and emotion, the argument to be pursued here is that if the results of such a dissociation have indeed been at work in Western culture for many years now, it has been accompanied by a more important one, better regarded as a dissociation between *levels* of consciousness. The failure

to take full account of the fact that more than one kind, ranging from the fully alert analysing consciousness to unconscious states in which important mental actions can still take place, may be effective in the same person acts as a block to recognition of this further dissociation, which in one sense is a matter of everyday experience, in another one too subtle to be easily appreciated or defined.

Rather than focusing on the existence of alternating personalities that are, in the end, like one another in the way that Jekyll and Hyde may, and do, simply substitute for one another, an important legacy of Romantic work has been to indicate a difference between states of conscious ratiocination (of a kind that might be replicated by a computer) and states of what I have found it convenient to term Being (which cannot). These are commonly revealed in subconscious activity; they may even be on occasion unavailable to verbal consciousnesses of any kind, calling for other means if they are to find representation.

In earlier work I also pointed out that when writers in any way forsake allegiance to conventional society they may also turn their backs on conventional means of expression and so find themselves on the wider sea of Being, where they lack familiar points of organization. In that case their energies are likely to move in one of two directions: to that which directly favours the immediate, the 'occasion', the *kairos*, and that which leans back to the 'eternal', the *aionic*. Drawing on the work of Kermode and, more directly, Panofsky, I summarized the way in which these two conceptions have played their part in traditional iconography:

These two great figures, which Panowsky ascribes to the classical world, indicate an attitude to Time in which the quantitative perception of Chronos (and consequent melancholia at the inevitability of impermanence) plays a strictly subordinate part. 'Kairos' (or Opportunity) is normally represented as a young man with wings at shoulders and heels, and scales – originally balanced on the edge of a shaving-knife, and later on one or two wheels; he has a forelock which can be seized. 'Aion' has two forms: connected with Mithra, he may appear as a grim winged figure with lion's head and lion's claws, tightly enveloped by a huge snake and carrying a key in either hand; alternatively, however, he appears as the Orphic divinity commonly known as Phanes, a beautiful winged youth, surrounded by a zodiac, equipped with various attributes of cosmic power, and (likewise) encircled by the coils of a snake.¹²