

Under Cover of the Night

KLEINE WELT // PART II

By Dieter Roelstraete



From January 17 until April 6, 2019, the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago hosted *Kleine Welt*, an exhibition devoted to the idiosyncratic art of the book cover named after a 1918 etching by Paul Klee. *Kleine Welt* (which translates to *Little World*) was rooted in a twofold observation I presume to be thoroughly familiar to habitual consumers of scholarly literature. First, why do authors and publishers in the field of twentieth-century philosophy and capital-T Theory so often turn to Paul Klee—often even the same Paul Klee painting, over and over again—to adorn the covers of their books? And second, are the authors and publishers who put Caspar David Friedrich’s iconic *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) on the covers of their books (or CDs, LPs) ever aware of how many others have done the exact same thing before them? Thus was conjured the titular little world of academic publishing, invoked in an exhibition consisting primarily of scholarly books, assembled inside vitrines, with the same dozen artworks or so on the cover, Friedrich’s *Wanderer* and a handful of eternally recurring Klee classics. (Paul Klee appears to be a particularly popular choice for authors and publishers in the philosophical subgenre of Critical Theory.)

On a fundamental level, the *Kleine Welt* project—which has since resulted in a publication—acts as a reflection about the power of the image, of a select handful of images, and their spellbinding grip on the intellectual imagination: early examples, if you like, of viral imagery, or analogue memes. What I am interested in above all is these images’ *afterlife*—the ease with which they have entered the stream of our cultural consciousness and smoothly sail from one frame of reference or system of thought to another. *Kleine Welt* is a homage to the power held by these images over a discipline of the mind that often fancies itself impervious to the lure and surface charm of the world of “pictures,” and often likes to think of itself as above and beyond imaging. (Not so.)

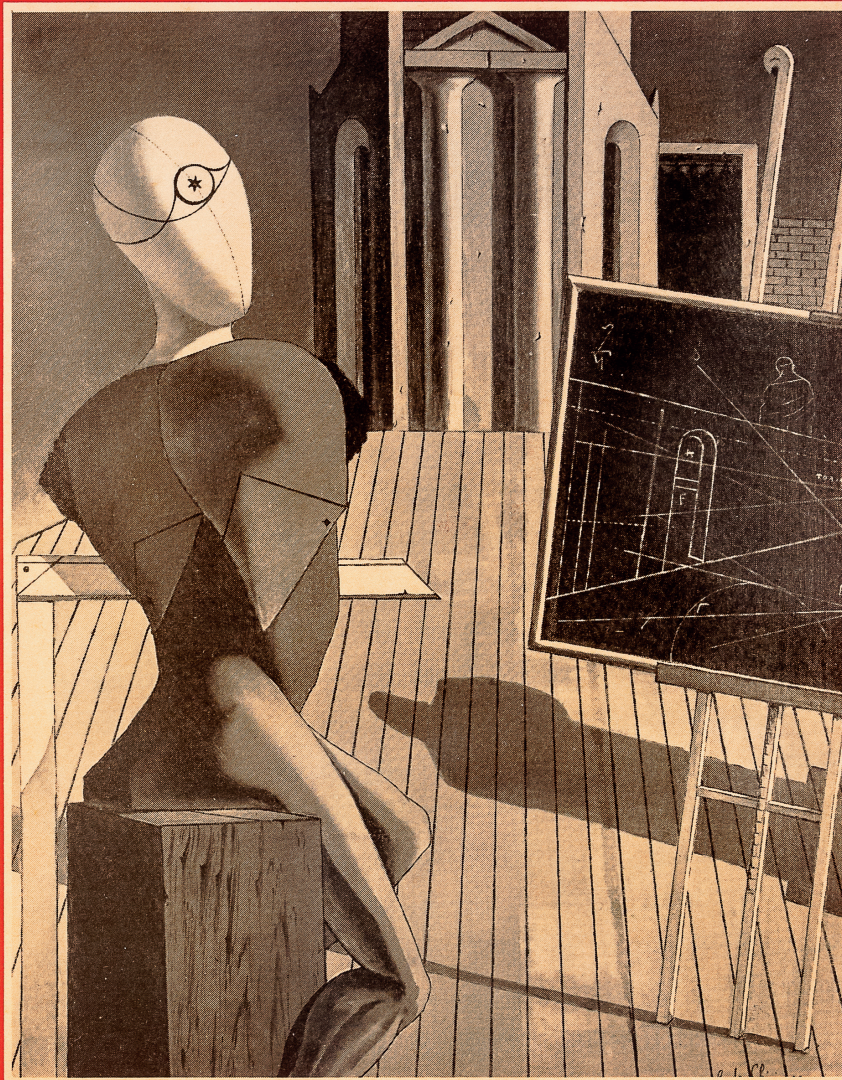
Kleine Welt is an ongoing project. I cheerfully continue to judge books by their covers and to collect philosophy tomes sporting Paul Klee artworks. In the meantime, I have also started to amass books with other Friedrich covers than the omnipresent, immortal *Wanderer*; this has admittedly become something of an addictive habit. And there are other dependable purveyors of philosophical imagery as well of course—Giorgio de Chirico perhaps foremost among them (René Magritte is another favorite). What follows is a selection of book covers, complete with annotations, that did not make the original *Kleine Welt* cut—a De Chirico & Friedrich special.

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***Kleine Welt*, curated by Dieter Roelstraete at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago, ran from January 17 through April 6, 2019.**

BOOK COVERS: Photographs © Assaf Evron. **INSTALLATION SHOTS:** Installation view, *Kleine Welt: Paul Klee + Zachary Cahill, R. H. Quaytman, David Schutter*, Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society. Photographs © Robert Chase Heishman.

MADNESS and MODERNITY

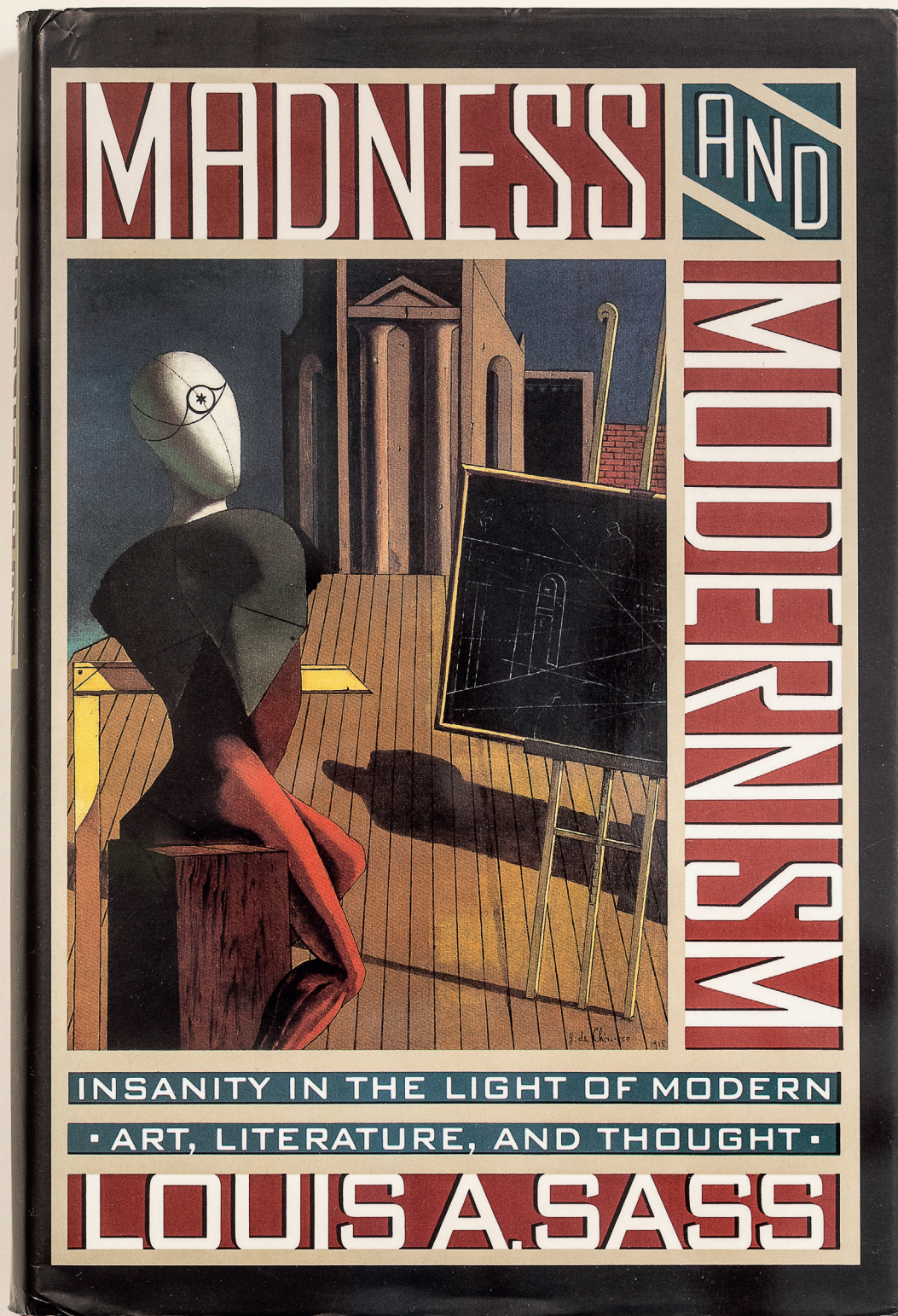
C. R. Badcock



I.

The “little world” of academic publishing in a nutshell. Here are two books with quasi-interchangeable titles and plainly identical de Chirico cover art, published less than a decade apart: *Madness and Modernity* (1983) versus *Madness and Modernism* (1992). Was the author of the latter, Louis A. Sass, at all aware of the existence of the former, authored by one C. R. Badcock? *Madness and Modernism* was published by Basic Books in New York;

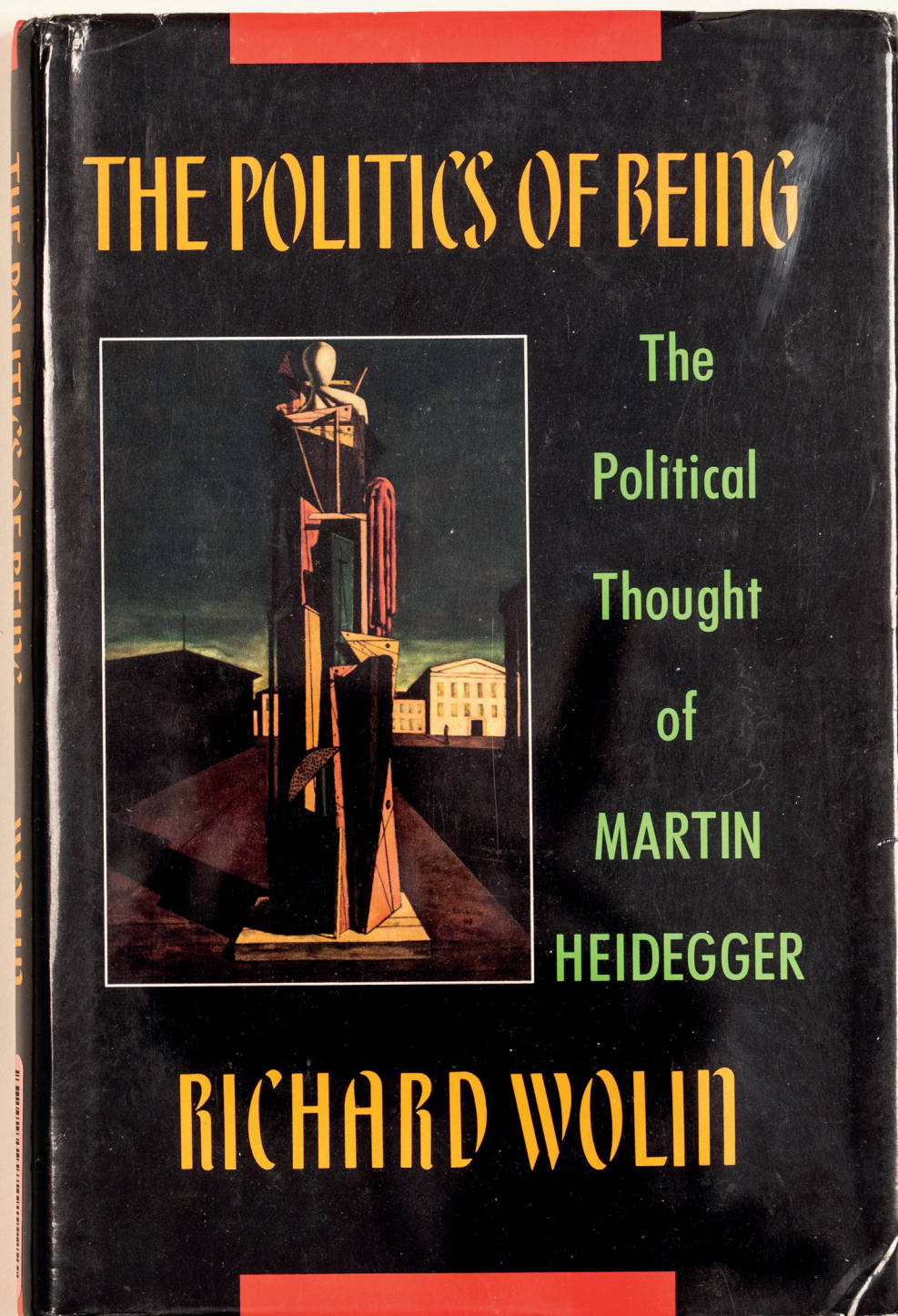
Madness and Modernity was published by Basil Blackwell in Oxford and New York—perhaps the Basic Books designer could have checked in with his colleague and counterpart at Basil Blackwell? For not only differ the titles only by a negligible pair of letters (“ty”/“sm”), they share the exact same artwork: de Chirico’s appropriately titled *The Seer* from 1915, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Appropriately titled indeed—did anyone *not see*?



II.

There is some historical, philosophical justice, at least, in the fact that *Madness and Modernism* appeared after the publication of *Madness and Modernity*: modernity *does* indeed predate and precede modernism. (I eagerly await seeing *The Seer* appear on the cover of a book titled *Madness and Modernization* – any takers?) Both authors clearly believe de Chirico to be the chronicler *par excellence* of the psychopathologies that buttress modern life, which we are encouraged to interpret as figures of agoraphobia,

alienation, anomie, anxiety, paranoia, schizophrenia, and the like. (Sass calls de Chirico a “severely schizoid man,” a historically unsubstantiated claim.) The de Chirico of the 1910s is the painter of modern life as a *lifeless* affair, of a rigor mortis, machinic atrophy and cold that does not look anything like the classic vision of madness as a hot-blooded, choleric passion. de Chirico paints the insignificance of man as thing in a *grosse Welt*.

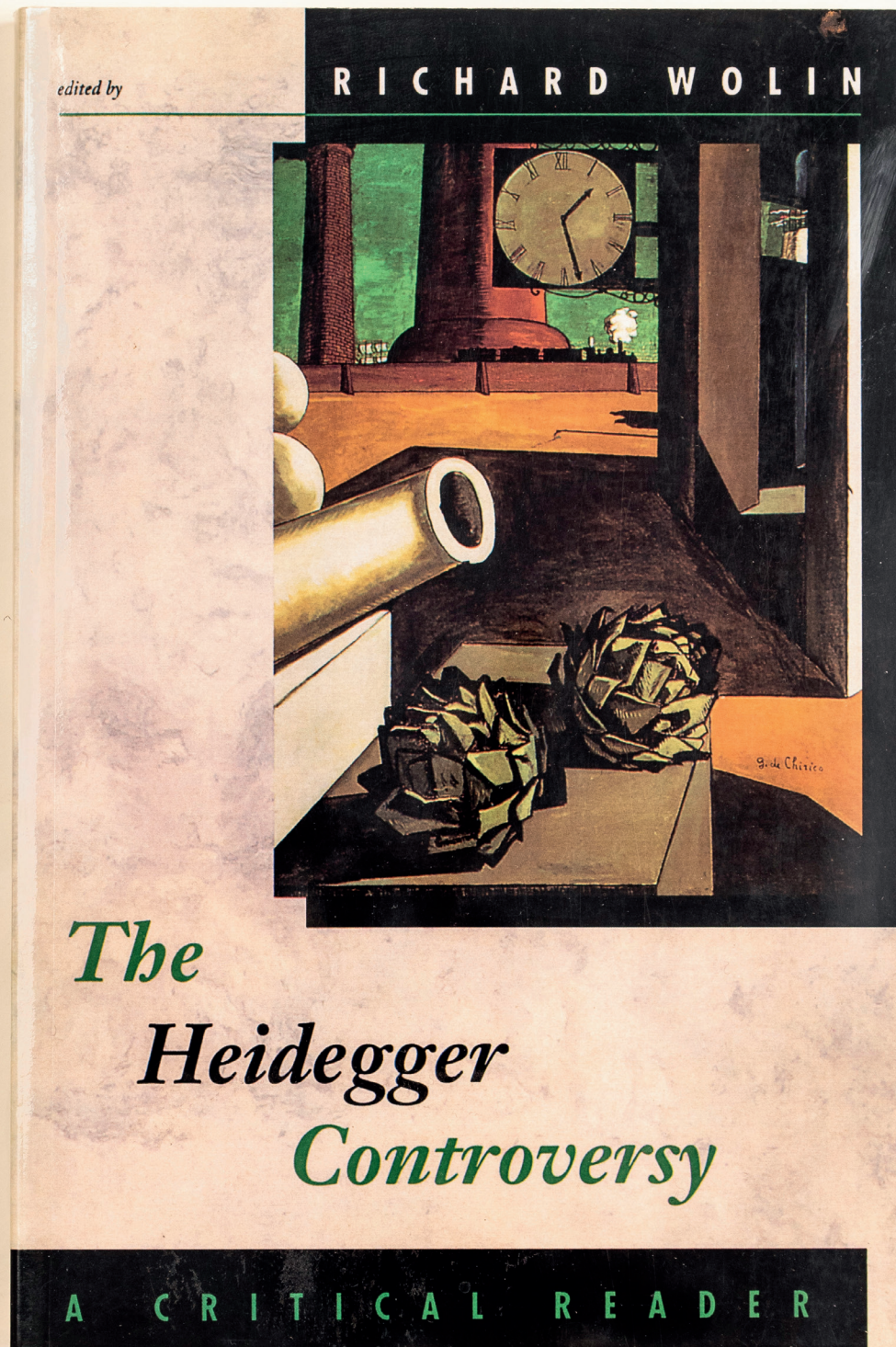


III.

Richard Wolin *loves* de Chirico: the Italian master's work graces the covers of three of Wolin's best known and most widely read books. (The CUNY-affiliated historian of ideas has good taste: other books of his have featured the art of Man Ray—both painting and sculpture—as well as that of the ubiquitous Klee. In fact, Wolin has published two books with the same iconic Klee image on the cover: the ubiquitous *Angelus Novus* (1920). Both books are devoted, of course, to the thought of Walter Benjamin and his Frankfurt School cohorts: an obvious association in the minds of those well aware of the story of this diminutive monotype once owned by Benjamin and now in the collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The Politics of Being is the first of a series of books by Wolin devoted to the haunting presence of (one-time Nazi party member) Martin Heidegger shadowing twentieth-century philosophy. That de Chirico and Heidegger seem to belong together, in the imagination of this author, surely relates to the former's controversial courting of a return to classical pictorial values in the midst of the surrealist revolution, as well as to the artist's fondness of imaging rigor mortis—the lifeless vistas and bleak desolation of the human condition that are at the heart of Heidegger's dramatic diagnosis of modernity's “forgetfulness of being”.

The artwork shown on the cover of *The Politics of Being*, first published in 1990, is the (very) appositely titled *The Great Metaphysician*, dated 1917, now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



IV.

This is the second book by Wolin devoted to the thought of Heidegger, a critical reader covering the so-called “Heidegger Controversy,” centered around what Wolin names “one of the foremost conundrums of modern European intellectual history: (...) the delusion to which Martin Heidegger—probably the century’s greatest philosopher—succumbed in 1933: the belief that the National Socialist Revolution represented the ‘saving power’ (Hölderlin) of Western humanity; a power capable of redeeming European culture from the dislocations of a rationalistic, modernizing, and nihilistic bourgeois *Zivilisation*.” This was of course all long before the publication, in 2014, of Heidegger’s notorious *Schwarze Hefte* or “Black Notebooks,”

the reading of which no longer allows us, at long last, to regard Heidegger’s involvement in the National Socialist project as somehow incidental or peripheral to his life in philosophy.

It is interesting to note that this still remarkably forgiving assessment of the “Heidegger controversy,” published in 1991, should meet our glance bearing de Chirico’s 1914 painting *The Philosopher’s Conquest* (now at the Art Institute of Chicago), showing a cannon, among other things, pointing its muzzle at the shaded void between a pair of artichokes and a railway station clock declaring it to be one thirty. In the afternoon or at night?

THE SEDUCTION OF UNREASON

THE INTELLECTUAL ROMANCE WITH FASCISM
FROM NIETZSCHE TO POSTMODERNISM



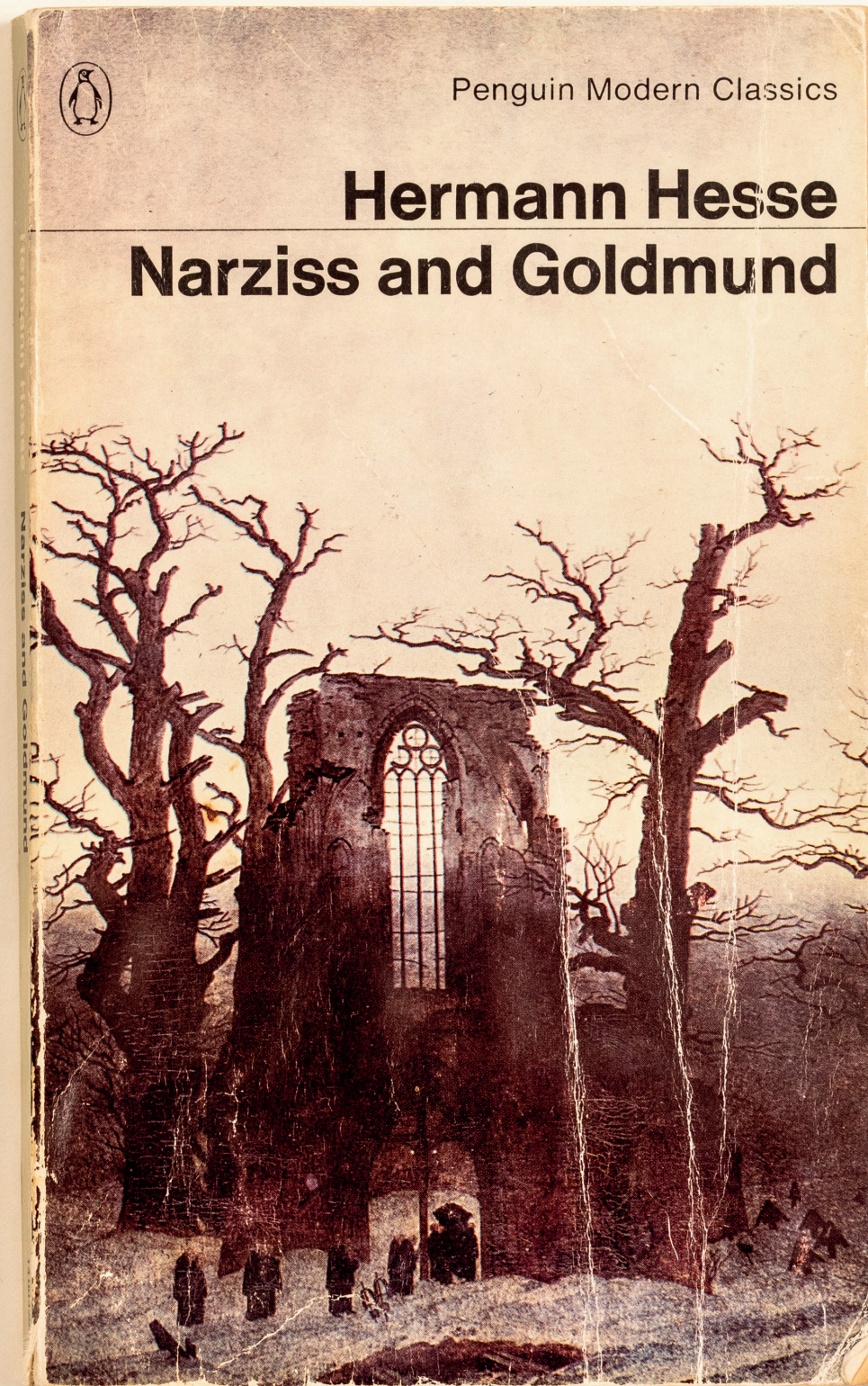
RICHARD WOLIN

AUTHOR OF *HEIDEGGER'S CHILDREN*

V.

With this book published in 2004, Wolin's fascination with the suitability of de Chirico's work to "illustrate" ideas percolating in the right wing of the modern philosophical spectrum reaches full circle. *The Seduction of Unreason* aspires to map "the intellectual romance with fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism," which, in the author's reading, unfurls primarily between the twin poles of "German ideology" (Gadamer, Jung, Schmitt et al.) and its "French lessons" (Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida et al.).

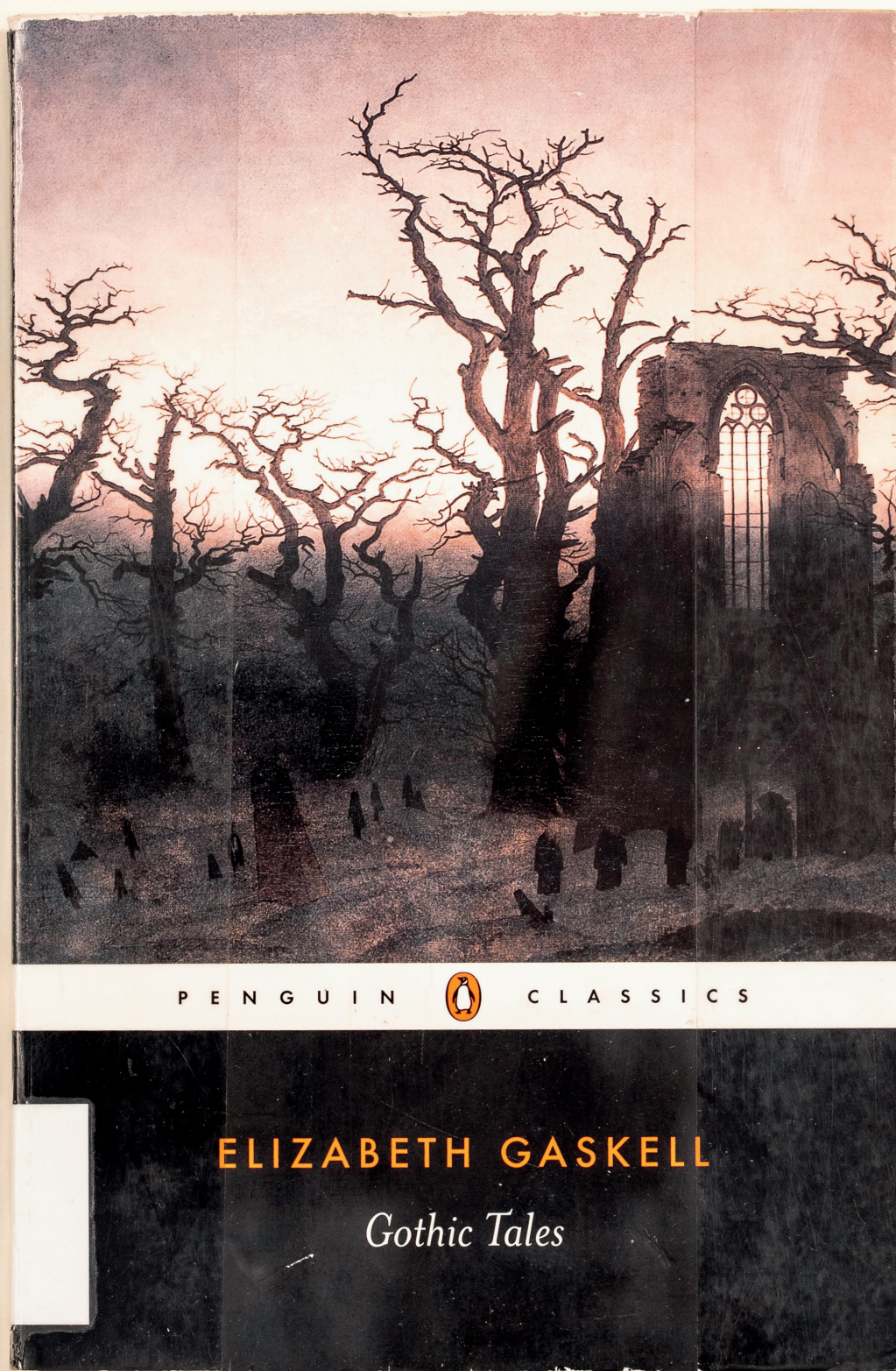
Wolin helpfully prefaces his study with a note on his use of de Chirico's *Song of Love*, the 1914 painting reproduced on the cover (now owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York), noting that "in many respects the painting's imagery is germane to the theme implied by my title: that 'unreason' has an uncanny power to fascinate and seduce." As in: a limp rubber glove hung next to a portrait of Apollo, the god of insight and knowledge (among many other jurisdictions), here reduced to a lifeless, disembodied fragment spectrally floating atop a dark green sphere. Right?



VI.

No artist is more closely associated with German idealism and the Romantic movement than Friedrich (1774–1840), the undisputed prince of “northern” painting. Friedrich, of course, was a contemporary of the protagonists of this singularly influential movement in art, culture and philosophy (Hegel and Hölderlin were both born in 1770, Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel in 1772, Friedrich Schelling in 1775), and his work has come to utterly dominate the market in the business of translating German idealism and Romanticism’s complex core ideas into legible images.

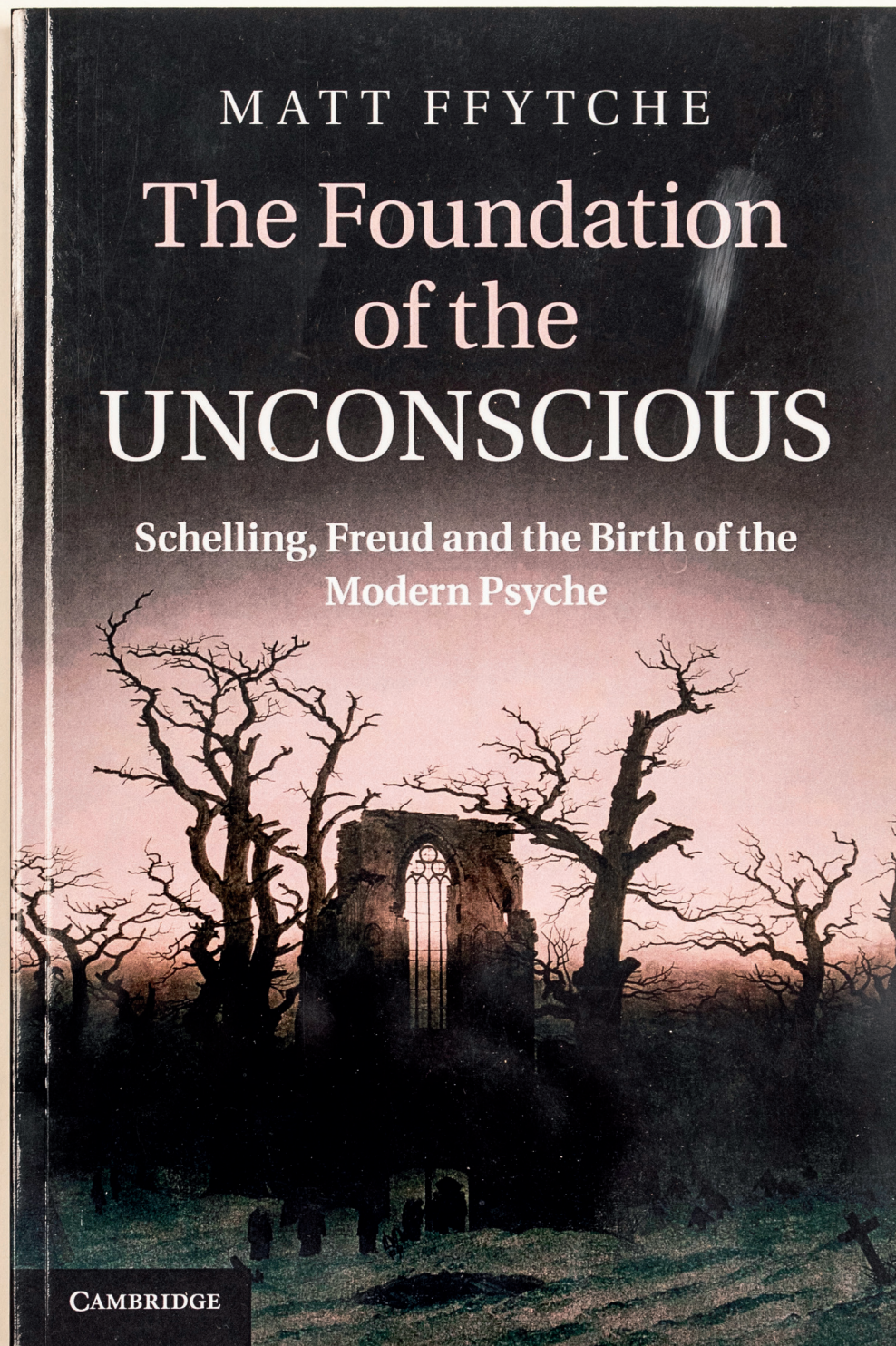
Indeed, nothing quite compresses the very German idea of Romanticism like Friedrich’s best known and most widely reproduced image, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (now in the Kunsthalle Hamburg), which adorns no less than sixteen book covers in my personal library alone (a third of them Nietzsche titles, another third histories of modernity). Other Friedrich icons have likewise embarked on a long afterlife of stock book cover fodder—see, for instance, his *Abbey in the Oakwood* from 1809–1810 (now in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin), shown here atop a 1971 Penguin Modern Classics edition of Hermann Hesse’s *Narziss and Goldmund*.



VII.

Whereas Friedrich's *Wanderer* and series of three 'moonwatcher' motif paintings monopolize the publishing fantasy in philosophical and literary quarters, *The Abbey in the Oakwood* looms especially large in the Gothic imagination—also in musical terms: it is the Friedrich painting most likely to grace the cover of a wintery slab of new school black metal, for instance. (In the 1970s, recordings made of both Mozart's *Requiem* and Brahms'

Ein deutsches Requiem were housed in LP sleeves sporting said *Abbey*.) Seeing *The Abbey in the Oakwood* appear on a book titled *Gothic Tales* (composed by Elizabeth Gaskell, who was born in the year this painting was completed), in other words, is about as surprising as encountering *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* on the cover of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: memes, really, *avant la lettre*.



VIII.

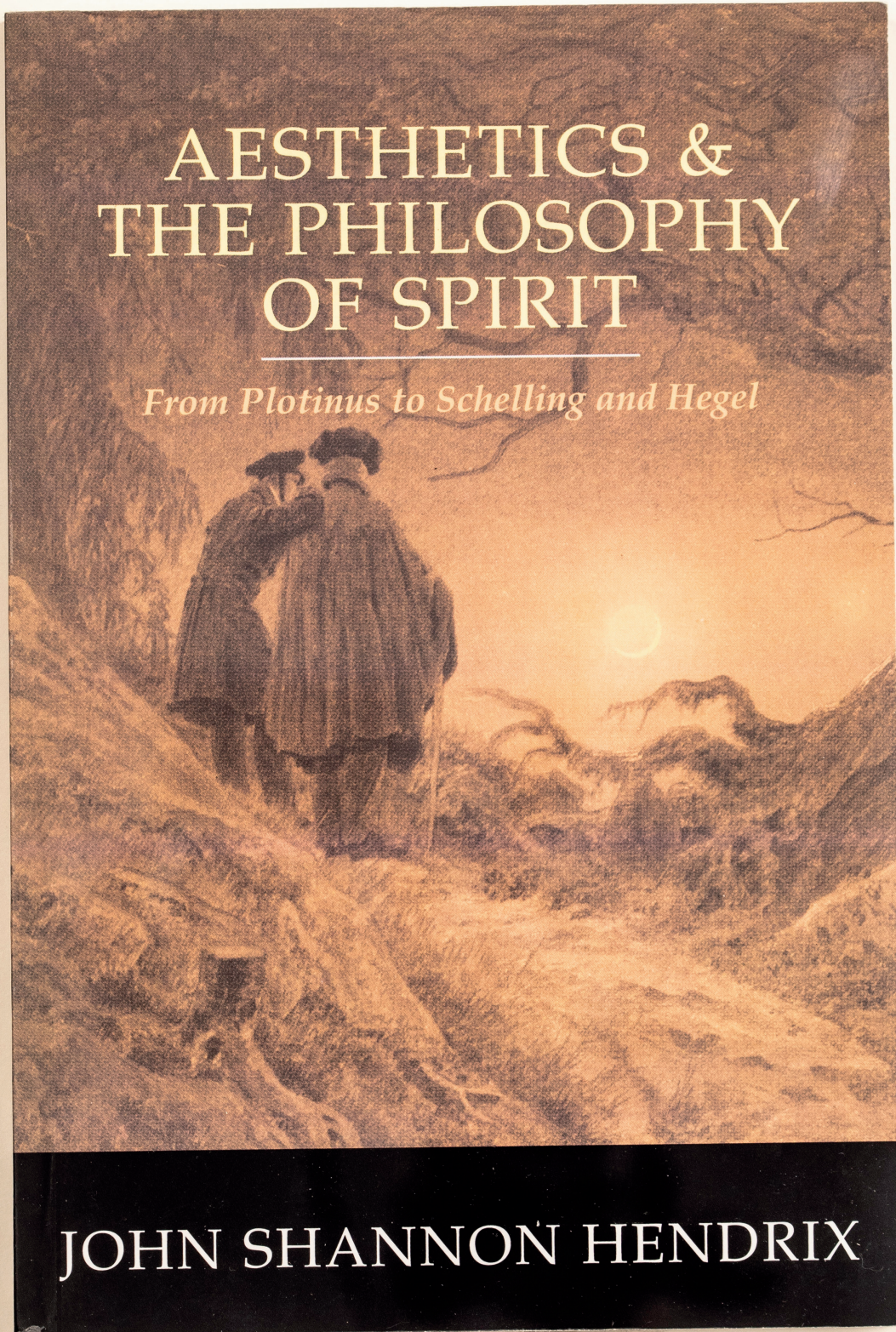
The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche by the British historian of psychoanalysis Matt Ffytche was published in 2012. Among the texts quoted in this tentative “historiography of the unconscious” is the foundational “Oldest System Programme of German Idealism,” an anonymous manifesto dated to 1796 that has alternately been attributed to Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling: “the first Idea is naturally the notion of *my self* as an absolutely free being.” The very first text quoted in Ffytche’s study overall, however, is the following challenge, formulated by Freud in the early years of the twentieth century, to

the unquestioned belief in the stability of a fully self-conscious subject: “We want to make the I into the object of this investigation, our most personal I. But can one do that?”

Let us now look back at the painting on the cover, of an abbey in ruins, at dusk, in the snow: a procession of monks carrying a coffin among a jumble of graves. (These details are hardly visible on the book covers in question.) Are we witnessing the unceremonious burial of the grand subject of the Idealist philosophy of self? Was this ruined abbey once the proud fortress of the unchallenged I? Is Friedrich the first painter of the modern *psyche*, rather than the modern *subject*?

AESTHETICS & THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRIT

From Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel



IX.

It seems Caspar David Friedrich and Friedrich Schelling belong to each other (“Caspar David Friedrich Schelling”) in much the same way as, in Richard Wolin’s view, de Chirico and Heidegger: Friedrich paints what Schelling thinks—the lunar world of Spirit and teetering reason. John Shannon Hendrix’s *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit: From Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel* was published in 2005, showing a fragment

of the Dresden version of *Two Men Observing the Moon* (1819–1820) on its cover. Hendrix is interested in this particular painting because of its representation of the dissolution of form into light (*not* darkness), for “it is the formlessness of form which is the symbol of the infinite”—the standard aesthetic intimation of the sublime. And “for Schelling, in *The Philosophy of Art*, [this] sublime *only occurs in art*.” My italics!

The Romantic Conception of Life

SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE AGE OF GOETHE



Robert J. Richards

X.

The painting on the cover of Robert J. Richards' *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (2002) is the Berlin version, painted in 1825, of *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon*. Compare, for starters, the remarkable difference in postures between the "two men" in the Dresden painting (visibly close friends, and one of them is widely assumed to have been Friedrich himself) and "man and woman" (most likely Friedrich and his wife Caroline)—as well as the bizarre omission of the upright figure's walking stick in the latter and a decidedly

different lunar spectacle (in the Dresden picture the visual emphasis is very much on the waxing moon, in the Berlin picture it has shifted to the gnarly tree). "*Science and philosophy in the age of Goethe*"? The great bard, known for his rather cool and distant demeanor towards the Jena Romantics, started out as a champion of Friedrich's work, but eventually ended up warning his contemporaries that "one ought to break Friedrich's pictures over the edge of a table; such things must be prevented." This world is too small for competing visions of the Romantic.