Fantasy and the Unconscious in the Rhetoric of Burke and Thelwall in the 1790s
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Although polar opposites in most respects, ideologically, politically, and socially, the counter-revolutionary Edmund Burke and the “Jacobin” John Thelwall in the 1790s both used an emotionally associative rhetorical style informed by fantasies of revolution. Their rhetoric can be read in terms of the unconscious associations with the revolutionary ideals of fraternity, equality, and liberty. At the center of the psychohistory of the revolution are regicide and tyrannicide, topoi in literary discourse from classical antiquity to Shakespeare and Milton. As fantasy, killing the king connects affectively with patricide, and if we follow Darwin and Freud, phylogenetic memories of the primal horde killing the tyrannical patriarch. The fantasy gives rise to an ambivalent reaction, an ecstatic liberation of desire and a sensation of freedom from paternal constraint, but also guilt and fear of the patriarch’s ghostly, violent return (Lacan, Seminar VII). Although the distinction between tyrannicide and regicide shapes the political discourse, king-killing as such is psychologically provocative in terms of hope and anxiety.