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**SILENCE AND THE CRISIS OF SELF-  
LEGITIMATION IN ENGLISH  
ROMANTICISM**

**SCOTT JAMES MASSON**

**PhD**

**UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES**

**2000**

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## **Silence and the Crisis of Self-Legitimation in English Romanticism**

My thesis depicts the crisis of self-legitimation that has accompanied the onset of modern hermeneutics, with its historicised and organicised version of the Enlightenment's 'universal perspective.' In this it follows the lead of the contemporary hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer in resuscitating the notion of prejudice, but contrasts it with Hannah Arendt's discussion of the human condition. She implicitly locates the problem in modern hermeneutics, the *aporia*, in the very philosophy of life that Gadamer embraces as its solution. Gadamer confuses the task of the humanities as a search for truth with what it ought to be, a search for meaning. I begin with his depiction of Kant's attack on the *sensus communis*; I conclude with an examination of the consequences of this attack on the orientation and interpretative practices of current schools of literary criticism with specific reference to Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn.

In the central chapter, I focus upon Coleridge's attack on Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802) in the Biographia Literaria, reading it as a fundamental defence of prejudice based on the very fact that man has been made *in imago Dei*. The consequent *logocentricity* of humanity that Coleridge insists upon opposes Wordsworth's emphasis upon a transcendental idea of 'feeling.' This fundamental notion forms the basis of Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination. I argue the distinctiveness of his definition from that of the other Romantics and maintain its necessity to escape the *aporia*. This point is proved negatively by Shelley's Mont Blanc, which seizes upon the radical consequences of Wordsworth's poetics, presenting both heresy and obscurity in the poem. The word 'crisis' thus reflects the urgency with which I advocate the need to re-adopt Coleridge's emphases in contemporary literary criticism.

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## Introduction

Why is there something rather than nothing? This has been the metaphysical question that philosophers have sought to answer since the time of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle said that to speak the truth is ‘to say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not.’<sup>1</sup> The attempt to establish that ‘what is’ actually is however is complicated in a world in a continual state of change. Even the ancient philosophers had never based their speculation upon worldly appearances alone. On the contrary, metaphysical speculation was always to a certain extent an exercise in ‘saving the appearances’ from their tendency to decay and disappear. For Plato, this involved contemplating (*theoreo*) the relations of truth behind geometric reality. Plato’s emphasis was not unusual. The assumption that some form of analogous correspondence lay between the visible world and an invisible one was fairly ubiquitous in Western philosophy until the time of the Enlightenment. The worldly and imperfect particulars had perfect divine forms corresponding to them.

Philosophical speculation had its counterpart in theological dogma as well. The Biblical writings assert that certain earthly things created or instituted by God have the status of shadows of a greater reality. This is a consistent emphasis in the New Testament. To cite some examples, the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes that the Jerusalem temple had been constructed according to divine specifications as ‘a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.’<sup>2</sup> He also refers to the Mosaic law in such terms, as ‘only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves.’<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul observes that this holds true of certain human relations too, explaining the relation of husband to wife in marriage as an analogy that points to the relationship of Christ to the church.<sup>4</sup> This world’s pattern of intimating a better world and a right relationship with its Creator in life to come in ‘a new Heaven and a new Earth’ is acknowledged by the apostle in his famous disquisition on love: ‘for now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.’<sup>5</sup> What the apostle refers to pre-eminently as having been ‘seen darkly’ though is the foremost instance of divine love: the fulfilment of Old Testament prophesy in the incarnation of the Christ himself who ‘tabernacled among us,’<sup>6</sup> the temple that was destroyed and then raised in three days and in whom believers dwell as ‘living stones.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. 4.7.1. (1011b).

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 8: 5.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 10: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. 5: 21-33.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 13: 12.

<sup>6</sup> John 1: 14.

<sup>7</sup> John 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:10-17.

The plan of education delineated in Milton's tract 'Of Education,' in its tacit acknowledgement of the necessity of cultivating common sense through an appeal to the senses, displays just how profoundly the emphases of Greek philosophy and Christian theology on a correspondence between two worlds continued to pervade the thinking of the late-Renaissance mind:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright... But because our understanding cannot in this body found itself but on sensible things nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge of God and things invisible as by orderly conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is necessarily to be followed in all discreet teaching.<sup>8</sup>

The traditional focus of the *humanities*, the study of man in respect to his person and in particular to his words and deeds in light of the world to come as a secondary means of knowing more about God and about truth formed a significant part of Western education until the Enlightenment.

However, since the time that Galileo discovered with his telescope, contrary to its appearance to the naked eye, that the universe revolved around the sun rather than the earth – entailing that the world and everything in it must be in an imperceptible state of motion – the answer to the metaphysical question that Aristotle posed has taken on a revolutionary turn. Galileo's discovery has effects that resonate throughout the modern age, even if it went largely unheralded at the time and hardly captured the popular imagination as his demonstration of falling bodies from the tower of Pisa did. 'Since a babe was born in a manger, it may be doubted whether so great a thing has happened with so little stir.'<sup>9</sup> For not only did it suggest that the *senses* were utterly unreliable as a means of accessing the invisible realm of truth through their visible proxy, it also brought into doubt everything and everyone that lay within the earthly sphere, from laws to institutions to human relations. It did so by demonstrating that the same sort of force moved heavenly bodies as affected terrestrial objects. John Donne poignantly notes the impotence of the 'old philosophy' in countering the new universal philosophy and records the resultant decline in belief in the testimony of the world of appearances:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt  
The Element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sunne is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit  
Can well direct him, where to looke for it.  
And freely men confesse, that this world's spent,  
When in the Planets, and the Firmament

<sup>8</sup> John Milton. 'Of Education.' Areopagitica and Other Prose Works. (1941). 44.

<sup>9</sup> A.N. Whitehead. Science and the Modern World. (1967). 2.

They seeke so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.<sup>10</sup>

The telescope's discrediting of the testimony of the bare senses and the physical world they mediated by its appeal to a *contradictory* universe had an enormous if only gradually realised effect upon education and on man's sense of his place in the world. The Enlightenment ideals of clarity and distinction that followed in the wake of Galileo's observation, it could be said, were *universal prejudices* that cast a *new* shadow over thinking, the shadow of *universal doubt*. Its shadow did not merely hearken to a greater reality as before. Instead, it promised to bring the greater, universal, reality that operated behind the visible *immediately* into the world of the finite and particular, the here and now. I attempt to explore some of the consequences of importing this universality into Western thinking in the following by looking at its influence in the poetry and theoretical speculation of the English Romantics.

A useful means of identifying the revolutionary universality adopted into Romantic poetics is by observing a foregoing analogy for it in cosmological thinking. Cosmology had one fairly superficial change made to it by Galileo's discovery: the tendency since the ancient world to regard not only immediate circumstances but even the distant planets to exert a profound influence upon human beings – reflected in their appellation as Roman gods – was totally disrupted. The universe appeared to operate autonomously, without reference to the earth or its inhabitants. But a far more portentous change was also enacted in the new *perspective* with which man took to regard the cosmos. C.S. Lewis informs us that medieval man, when he gazed upon the night sky, would probably have viewed it much as one would now regard a great building from its base.<sup>11</sup> To note just how markedly Galileo's telescope changed this sense of looking *up* on God's massive and finite universe we need only reflect upon the famous statement of the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Probably alluding in his reference to 'silence' to the debunking of the Platonic idea of the harmonious music of the perfect heavenly spheres, Pascal, the first agoraphobe on record, saw in the night sky not a massive but finite and harmonious structure, but what we now refer to as 'outer space.' The sense of solitude at being on the inside looking *out* into infinite and autonomous vacancy terrified him: 'Le silence eternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.'<sup>12</sup> Lewis, comparing the effect of the two cosmological views, helpfully remarks that:

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<sup>10</sup> John Donne. 'The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World.' 205-12.

<sup>11</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard's study The Elizabethan World Picture (1972) and C.S. Lewis's The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature (1964) both emphasise the profound influence on human affairs attributed to the celestial bodies.

<sup>12</sup> Pensées. iii, 206-201.



...to look out on a night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest – trees forever and no horizon.... The ‘space’ of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, but theirs is classical. (99)

The change in cosmological perspective was significant because it affected how the issue of truth was approached in the humanities as well, a change well captured by Lewis’s reference to the ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ *universes*. For truth in the ‘romantic age’ – which in a sense at least begins with Galileo and a cosmological change – was no longer sought as a form of correspondence that the visible world bore to the invisible world, but as a *relationship* man’s *thoughts* bore to a perspective that disregarded the world of finite appearances altogether – the ‘romantic universal perspective.’ From its vantage, the distance between man and reality became both infinitely remote – as Pascal sensed it – and simultaneously intimately realisable – as the newly discovered realm of intimacy attested. This effect did not owe itself to the fact that the distance between man and the universe had become more accurately measured. It owed itself to the fact that the terms of perception had altered to those of Cartesian *internal* cognitive processes, processes as invisible and yet ‘real’ as it argued the terms of the ‘real world’ of ancient philosophy and Christian theology to be doubtful. For with the emerging modern sciences’ ability to harness the powers of the universe, the infinite seemed now at hand in the present. The new shadows of the ‘real world’ that the ‘romantic universal perspective’ attested to were those of the world of the imagination.

But even an appeal to this much-touted word ‘imagination,’ so strongly identified with the Romantic poets, can be deceiving. The ‘images’ that the developing sense of the ‘Romantic imagination’ employed were not *mimetic* ones imitating the visible world as had occupied the imagination before, but rather *functional* ones whose primary place of reference was the ‘inner-world’ of the mind. The new Cartesian terms of universality in fact dissolved the old relationship between the visible and the invisible worlds. The invisible and real world now lay *outside* the visible world, in the autonomous, ‘ideal’ realm of theory.<sup>13</sup> Because of the capacity of the faculty that Kant later designated as the ‘reason’ to delve into the workings of the universe ‘purely’ without reference to worldly things, the opinion on the nature of the

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<sup>13</sup> This is marked by a conceptual change in the sense of ‘theoretical.’ It was no longer the sense in which Plato had established the use of the word, as the ‘observation of the eternal’ (Gr. *theoria* – contemplation) by an inner sense, the ‘eyes of the mind.’ Hannah Arendt, whom I refer to frequently in the second chapter of the thesis, suggests it was as if the eyes of the mind were transported *outside* the visible universe altogether in the new perspective.

'things invisible' changed.<sup>14</sup> Arendt observes an aspect of Cartesianism often unacknowledged by histories of philosophy:

What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensory and the suprasensory, together with the notion, at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses – God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (archai) or the Ideas – is more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears, that it is not just *beyond* sense perception but *above* the world of the senses. What is "dead" is not only the localization of such "eternal truths" but also the distinction itself... (However) the sensory, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the suprasensory. No one knew this better than Nietzsche, who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God, has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of the Idols*, he clarifies what the word "God" meant in the earlier story. It was merely a symbol for the suprasensory realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses, instead of "God," the expression "true world" and says: "We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one."<sup>15</sup>

The loss of the true world and the apparent world have left a rather odd legacy, a legacy that has been somewhat masked by the fact that certain basic terms of human knowledge have survived the destruction of the old two-world view. They are however otherwise unrecognisable as their earlier terms of reference. As was the case with the term 'imagination,' the conceptual changes we note in the notions of physics, logic and geometry from being references to the natural world, the rules of the spoken word and the measurement of the earth respectively to being 'analytical sciences' with no correspondence to earthly reality but a theoretical one are all symptoms of the collapse of this 'basic distinction' between the sensory and suprasensory in modern thinking.

But the loss of this distinction also affected how *man* came to be regarded too: 'the visible and inferior creature' that Milton still cited as his main focus of study was less and less frequently to be found in his Enlightenment successors. In its place, a new conception of man became the object of interest and the source of speculation. Man either became the focus of biological study, which examined him universally as a form of life with no apparent prejudicial judgement attached – he was an organism like any other – or he became the focus of psychological study, which examined the mind, the focus of modern selfhood, as an elaborate processing mechanism. This latter interest appears most acute in the period that is commonly referred to as the Romantic period, and it is the area that interests me here. The

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<sup>14</sup> It is of course significant that Kant saw the central development of his critical philosophy as a *perspectival* change, a change he likened to the Copernican turn on astronomy.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Life of the Mind* (1975) 10-11. (Hereafter *LoM*). Nietzsche's claim is from "How the 'True World' finally became a fable." *The Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophise*

'invisible man' that is addressed in Romantic hermeneutics corresponds to an inhabitant of the world of purely self-referential intellectual processes, the processes of Descartes' cogito. But these processes are connected back to 'life' in the thinking of the period by the model of creation that the authors of the period adopt, the model of the organism, whose metabolic processes offer such a connection – and such a unifying vision. My study of 'Silence and the Crisis of Self-Legitimation in English Romanticism' explores some of the consequences of this change, particularly on the sphere of the *humanities*.

The changes that took place in the study of man are analogous to those that had taken place in the knowledge of the natural world. Franz Kafka, in one of his modern myths warned man against using the Archimedian point against himself, but his warning has gone unheeded. The possibility that Kafka foresaw a century ago has become the subject of critical attention in the area now known as hermeneutics. Hermeneutics concerns itself with the problem of establishing the legitimacy of this new study of man. There is little doubt that this area of study, which commenced in the Romantic period, has remained a central contemporary concern. Charles Taylor asserts that the primary interest of contemporary Continental philosophy is the study of man as 'a self-interpreting animal.'<sup>16</sup> The German physicist Werner Heisenberg comments that our astrophysical world-view delivers to us not so much knowledge of the universe as of how it affects the instruments that measure it. In other words man only ever encounters in his science projections of himself.<sup>17</sup> And what he discovers within his 'inner world' is not an image of any permanence upon which he could reflect, but a constant whirr of sensual perceptions and mental activities. The same holds true of the organic model that the Romantic poets adopted.

It is my intention to explore the problem of self-legitimation that contemporary hermeneutics has observed to accompany the study of man since the onset of what is called 'modern hermeneutics.' It is not a work of historical scholarship; rather it purports to be a philosophical engagement with Romanticism that draws upon contemporary hermeneutic theory. The first chapter provides an overview of the field from the time of the Romantics until the present and observes the repeated hermeneutic problem of self-legitimation in contemporary thought. Following the cue of the contemporary hermeneuticist Hans-Georg

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with the Hammer. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964. 26. Arendt traces this sentiment to Kant in his pre-critical writings.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor. Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1. (1985). 45.

<sup>17</sup> Werner Heisenberg. The Physicist's Conception of Nature. (1958). 17-18. This is a view expanded upon by Thomas Kuhn in his widely influential work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. (1996). Kuhn rejects the thesis of the logical positivists that scientists choose between competing theories in a purely rational fashion, i.e. by appealing to theory-neutral observations.

Gadamer, I trace this problem to the replacement of the previous sense of common sense by one based on universality, which ignored the two-world distinction of the former. Like Gadamer, I try to establish that the axiomatic ‘prejudice against prejudice’ employed by Kant and the Enlightenment is an absurd *modus operandi* that has alienated mankind from the world – as prior judgements are always necessary for any subsequent acts of judgement to take place. However, unlike Gadamer, I do not think that Heidegger solves the problem of the hermeneutic *aporia* with his concept of truth as being-in-the-world. I agree with Hannah Arendt in seeing Gadamer’s problem in Heidegger’s confusion of the question of *meaning* with the question of *truth*. This is how he begins his Being and Time, by raising ‘anew the question of the meaning of Being.’<sup>18</sup> The Kantian idea of reason (*Vernunft*), as she reminds us, with its characteristic and ‘scandalous’ striving for certain and verifiable knowledge about matters it *cannot* know, yet *needs* to know about, i.e. the ‘ultimate questions’ of God, freedom and immortality ‘*is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same.*’<sup>19</sup> It is the urgency of ‘reason’s need’ that differentiates it from the normal need of knowledge, which concerns the understanding (*Verstand*) and the world of appearances that Heidegger calls the provenance of truth, but equally conflates with meaning: ‘Heidegger himself, in a later interpretation of his own initial question, says explicitly: “Meaning of Being’ and ‘Truth of Being’ say the same.”<sup>20</sup>

In the second chapter, I turn to Hannah Arendt’s historical discussion of the human condition and attempt to prove Gadamer’s hypothesis about the historical influence of the universal ‘prejudice against prejudice.’ Arendt’s discussion lends credence to the view that the contemporary dilemma indeed owes itself to the replacement of the old two-world views (and their common sense) by one based on universality and intimacy. She asserts against this new common sense the fundamental plurality and logocentricity of the human condition, the bases of individuality. But Arendt also makes a decidedly different contribution to the hermeneutic debate by examining the emergence of the phenomenon of ‘life as the greatest good’ in the organicist concepts of the Romantic period and beyond. This emergence is influential upon Romantic notions of poetry and also accounts for the emergence of the general hermeneutic movement – and the *aporia*. The ‘prejudice’ of life becomes the form of universality that informs thinking thereafter. To put it in the terms she suggests, sensible truth is grasped as if it were meaning and could provide the basis of an explanatory model of life.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger. Being and Time. (1962). 1. (Cf. 151, 324)

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt. LoM. 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> LoM. 15. (The quote is from Heidegger’s ‘Einleitung zu ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’ Wegmarken. 206.)

The third chapter steps backwards to examine how Coleridge confronted Wordsworth and his universal hermeneutics of feeling, related to this new sense of life and the poet's calling, in the Biographia Literaria. I shall contend that Coleridge, rather confusingly for a writer usually considered the archetypal Romantic theorist, employs a different sense of the imagination than that of his contemporaries and his successors, one that more strictly adheres to a traditional 'two world' view, and he points out the crisis of legitimation in the theory that Wordsworth proposes. The crisis is this: the Romantic poet wished to see himself as a prophetic figure, but on what basis can his utterances be termed legitimate? For Coleridge, the question of truth and the question of meaning had a unified answer because Christ, the meaning of life, *is* the truth, whereas for Wordsworth 'life' was that truth that was meaningful. The question of the sense and the legitimacy of this explanation is the question that I raise in discussing both Wordsworth's theory and that of his two younger contemporaries, Shelley and Keats.

I intend to examine Shelley's Mont Blanc in the fourth chapter as a work of prophetic imagination founded upon the common sense of universality in life I establish previously. Shelley however also delves into explicit forms of heresy in the poem, a practice that raises the question whether prophesy can be divested from the question of orthodoxy. From a universal perspective, the notions of heresy and orthodoxy are equally valid because from a universal perspective, everything is relative. But the poem is notoriously obscure as well. This leaves us in a quandary: how can we be critics of the poem unless we invoke seemingly anachronistic notions of legitimacy such as orthodoxy? I try to read the poem as a proof of the absurdity of its hermeneutic postulates. The final chapter of the thesis looks to Keats's paradoxical Ode on a Grecian Urn and discusses his use of silence in it, the confrontation of a philosopher of life with the urn and its silent and eternal depiction. It concludes with a discussion of the use of the ode as a touchstone for the legitimacy of various schools of literary criticism since the Second World War, returning the thesis full circle to where it had begun.

## Chapter 1 Modern Hermeneutics: the development of universal relativity by understanding meaning in terms of truth

The majority of the issues that are raised in this thesis are those that have been touched upon by the field of contemporary philosophy that is commonly designated hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a systematic discipline concerned with unearthing the principles regulating all forms of interpretation both in regard to its traditional focus, the text, and, since the time of the 'father of modern hermeneutics,' Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), to the relation of mankind to the idea of universality. His approach was developed more fully in the late nineteenth century by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who sought to provide a methodological foundation for the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) that he believed Kant had provided for the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) but had failed to provide for them. Dilthey maintained that the proper object of the human sciences is something specifically human, namely the inner, psychic life (*Erlebnis*, lived experience) of historical and social agents. Whereas the natural sciences sought to explain phenomena in a causal and, so to speak, external fashion of explanation (*Erklären*), Dilthey asserted that the method proper to the human sciences was that of empathetic understanding (*Verstehen*). I shall provide a more extended discussion of the main emphases of both Dilthey's and Schleiermacher's work shortly. They are of particular interest to a discussion of the English Romantics because Schleiermacher and, to a lesser extent, Dilthey presented hermeneutic perspectives that were similar to theirs.

My approach concentrates in particular however upon the hermeneutics of the contemporary philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, though it does not rest there. His work has become a focal point for contemporary discussions of hermeneutic issues because it appears to resolve a long-standing problem within the project of general hermeneutics. It promises to unite the now largely discredited 'methodological' or 'Romantic' hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey<sup>21</sup> with a Heideggerian form of ontology. Heidegger's work showed little interest of its own in the general hermeneutic project of recovering *meaning*. What he appeared to establish though, which makes him crucial for Gadamer's purposes, was how mankind could engage with the *truth* of being.

This separation of being from truth had been a philosophical problem ever since Descartes had separated being from appearance by his method of *universal doubt*; but it had

also been the central problem of the general hermeneutic project (and thus of the humanities) since Schleiermacher. Heidegger provides Gadamer, as the title of his main hermeneutic work *Truth & Method* attests, with a means to unite the 'truth' of his ontology with the methodological attempt to recover authorial 'meaning' that had characterised the initial project of a general hermeneutics. The unity of the two appears to be a rather uninspiring aim, but examining the consequences of their mutual exclusivity soon belies that impression. Before I go on to summarise the importance of Heidegger to Gadamer and the general hermeneutic project, I wish to discuss both the project's fundamental characteristics and its inherent difficulties and briefly mention how they are related to the crisis of self-legitimation in Romantic poetry.

It seems important to distinguish the basic tenor of my account of hermeneutics from an account by the influential hermeneuticist, Paul Ricoeur, which I shall in part relate in this first chapter. Ricoeur, in commenting on the evolution of general hermeneutics since the Romantics, described the process hermeneutics has undergone as follows:

I see the recent history of hermeneutics dominated by two preoccupations. The first tends progressively to enlarge the aim of hermeneutics, in such a way that all *regional* hermeneutics are incorporated into one *general* hermeneutics. But this movement of *deregionalisation* cannot be pressed to the end unless at the same time the properly *epistemological* concerns of hermeneutics – its efforts to achieve a scientific status – are subordinated to *ontological* preoccupations, whereby *understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become a *way of being* and a way of relating to beings and to being. The movement of *deregionalisation* is thus accompanied by a movement of *radicalisation*, by which hermeneutics becomes not only *general* but *fundamental*.<sup>22</sup>

Ricoeur is certainly right in noting that the development of 'general hermeneutics' displays the increasing rigour with which its premise of universality was applied. He misconstrues the issues in two ways however: Firstly, he does not attribute this development and its resultant problems sufficiently to the drive for *meaning* promised by a *universal* perspective and entirely related to the continued influence of the pursuit of reason (*Vernunft*). Secondly, he attributes a different preoccupation in the ontological movement of modern hermeneutics, the focus upon the question of truth, from that which had dominated the epistemological movement, whereas the two are merely different modifications of the drive for meaning. And the latter movement mistakenly embraces truth *as* meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> Dilthey's methodological approach underpinned the study of the humanities at the onset of the modern university. It aimed to recover meaning or, what was posited as the same thing, authorial intention.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. (1981). 43-44. (Hereafter *H&HS*)

To trace what I think are misapprehensions in Ricoeur's account, we must take a short step backwards to look at the understanding of the philosophical change that took place immediately prior to Schleiermacher, in Kantian philosophy. In many histories of philosophy, Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' 'the basis of contemporary philosophy,' is presented as a shift from objectivity to subjectivity that commenced with the subjective turn of Cartesian philosophy. This understanding informs Gadamer's and Ricoeur's accounts too. I wish to differentiate my emphasis from this however because understanding the shift as a change to a 'subjective perspective' actually misrepresents the motivation of both Kantian and Cartesian philosophy (even if it does so in Kantian terms). This in turn leads to an inevitable misinterpretation of the issues that were at work in the initial move to embrace a 'general hermeneutics.'

So as not to be misunderstood, I am not denying the anti-traditional dynamic of Enlightenment thinking. The change that took place first in Descartes and then more radically in Kant did indeed question the objectivity of tradition. But it did not do so on the individualistic (and invalid) basis of 'subjectivity' or with the intention of subverting the concept of authority as such. To understand the effect of the change *as its intention* is to offer an incredible explanation for the two philosophers motives, not to mention an historically inaccurate one. Descartes and Kant both disputed the objectivity of tradition and of language in order to embrace a more meaningful form of objectivity, i.e. *universality*, the perspective that transcended any particular events of history or culture. Universality was seen as a means of overcoming the particular 'objective' truths of tradition, whether they were of the Classical or the Biblical region of hermeneutics. It is only the self-defeating *consequences* of this universality that have appeared *subsequent* to the adoption of the universal perspective that have created the illusion that a change to a 'subjective perspective' *motivated* the attack on the objectivity of tradition and the turn to the feelings of the subject. It did not. Subjectivity, and its absolute relativity, was the ironic consequence of the move in adopting a universal perspective on meaning.

As I argued in the introduction, this change to a universal 'subjective perspective' actually came about because Kant and his successors had adopted a novel understanding of universality from Cartesian science, an understanding that preyed upon the fundamental two-world view of Western thinking. It had another consequence however:

With Galileo already, certainly since Newton, the word 'universal' has begun to acquire a very specific meaning indeed; it means 'valid beyond our solar system.' And something quite similar has happened to another word of philosophic origin, the word 'absolute,' which is applied to 'absolute time,' 'absolute space,' 'absolute motion,' or 'absolute speed,' in each usage meaning a time, a space, a movement, a



velocity which is present in the universe and compared to which earth-bound time or space or movement or speed are only 'relative.' Everything happening on earth has become relative since the earth's relatedness to the universe became the point of reference for all measurements.<sup>23</sup>

Ricoeur's account of the development of hermeneutics relays a different story. As a result of his tendency to understand meaning in the universal terms of 'timeless' or absolute truth he is led to explain, as we shall see, the original attempt of Romantic hermeneutics to recover *meaning* as a project without an established 'ontological' basis, i.e. a basis in truth-claims. This lack of a basis for truth-claims at the centre of the Romantic hermeneutic project ultimately brought their claim to be meaningful into question. This was, he says, only corrected by the re-orientation of hermeneutics towards a universal model of truth, in the model provided by Heidegger.

Prior to Heidegger's correction, this inversion of truth and meaning under a universal perspective created a fundamental divide between the processes of what Dilthey had called explanation (the scientific process of accessing truth) and understanding (the humanities' process of accessing meaning) within the ostensibly unified method of general hermeneutics. Claims for poetry's *meaning* could be made by means of a 'Romantic' hermeneutics, but claims for truth remained in the domain of science. The claims of poetry were judged to be nothing but inferior truth-claims. Dilthey's development of the *Geisteswissenschaften* was based on an attempt to rectify that and, by modelling itself on the *Naturwissenschaften*, to establish the truth that was characteristic of poetry. The consequences of this were no less problematic than the attempt to base hermeneutics on the recovery of meaning from a universal perspective.

To take one significant example of the problem that was created by Dilthey's hermeneutics, the attempt to establish truth in poetry and avoid the ultimately reductive search for an author's intention (or meaning) was expressed in the famous claim by one of the New Critics of the 1940s that 'poetry should not mean, but *Be*.' That project, which considered the text as an autonomous microcosm of the complexity of human experience, prescribed a process of 'close reading' that was isolated from a consideration of the author's intentions or the reader's responses. This process was advocated to preserve the organic integrity of the work of art and allow it to express its form of *truth* without reducing it to a series of historical processes extending *ad infinitum*. This methodology allowed poetry to be

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<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. (1998). 270. (Hereafter THC) It is well known that Kant tried to emulate what Newton did in the natural sciences in the realm of philosophy. What is usually

'truthful,' but it did so at the cost of permitting any interconnection of a poem with its context – in other words, it made it meaningless. Instead of the path to truth-claims on par with the natural sciences it had sought, Ricoeur argues that *Dilthey* produced an *aporia* in the human sciences.<sup>24</sup> This divide characterised the state of hermeneutics over the course of the nineteenth and on into the early twentieth century.

A means of uniting truth and meaning remained outstanding. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur see the phenomenological philosophy of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* as the basis of breaching that divide. Heidegger argued that this methodological *aporia* was a direct legacy of fundamental problems in Cartesian subjective philosophy. It was a result of Descartes' mental act of annihilating the world through universal *doubt* to create an ontologically *certain*, thinking self. This could be rectified by an appeal to what he calls 'inner-worldly being':

The being that Descartes attempts to pin down ontologically with the *extensio* is far more one that is initially discovered *immediately* by *inner-worldly being*. But be that as it may, even though the ontological character of this specifically *inner-worldly being* (nature) may lead to obscurity – both in the idea of its *substantiality* as well as the sense of *existit* and *ad existendum* included in its definition – the ontological problem of the world may still in some sense have been expressed and advanced by means of an ontology founding the 'world' on the radical separation of God and ego. But even if that is not so, it should still be noted that Descartes not only gives an ontologically false definition but also that his interpretation and its basis have led to the avoidance of both the phenomenon of the world and the existence of the initially present *inner-worldly being*.<sup>25</sup>

Gadamer's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics both attempt to surmount this *aporia* and establish a means of making meaningful truth-claims or, conversely, of recovering true meaning. They are often grouped together as proponents of a philosophical or 'phenomenological hermeneutics'.<sup>26</sup> Both have seized upon Heidegger's ontology as a way into being and as a 'way out' of the Cartesian *aporia*. This is because they see phenomenology as a means of overcoming the problem of *subjectivity*. The express purpose of that branch of philosophy was to overcome the division of subject and object that had dominated modern philosophy since Descartes:

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discounted is how dependent upon this notion of universality the whole project was.

<sup>24</sup> *Aporia* is the word Plato used in his dialogues to describe the state in which Socrates left his interlocutors after confounding their spurious arguments, i.e. 'without a way out.' Cf. Paul Ricoeur. *H&HS*. 43-44.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Sein und Zeit*, 95. (my translation and italics; hereafter *S&Z*)

<sup>26</sup> Good synopses of their hermeneutics are provided in the *Continental Philosophy of the 20th Century*. Ed. Richard Kearney. (1994). 290-349; Gerald Bruns. *Hermeneutics Ancient & Modern*. (1993); Anthony Thiselton. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. (1992). Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's also has an excellent introduction in his *The Hermeneutics Reader* (1994).

... the central problematic of modern philosophy itself, namely, the 'epistemological' problem of how an isolated subjectivity, closed in upon itself, can none the less manage to 'transcend' itself in such a way as to achieve a 'knowledge' of the 'external world.'<sup>27</sup>

Gadamer claims that what Heidegger accomplished was to give 'the human sciences a completely new background by making science's concept of objectivity appear to be a special case.'<sup>28</sup>

Before moving on to a more extensive critical analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutics, I will first provide a brief synopsis of some of the issues that arise in it. It seems important, given the continued presence of the *aporia* in contemporary hermeneutics, to introduce a 'case study' of how Gadamer explains the conflict between two different conceptions of hermeneutics leading up to the Romantic period, because it affects the interpretation of the problem thereafter. Kant's subjective turn in philosophy and his redefinition of several words that were central to the previous understandings of interpretation are central to that subsequent discussion. A history of modern hermeneutics, using Paul Ricoeur as its guide, provides that.

#### *A case study: Gadamer on Kant and moral sense philosophy*

While Heidegger traced the problem of the Enlightenment methodology back to Descartes (and specifically to the Cartesian *cogito*), Gadamer concentrates more on the implicit systematic structuring of Cartesian thinking upon the thinking of the humanities by the late Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. Gadamer's emphases in Truth and Method, as we shall see more clearly later, lie in three areas: the aesthetic sphere, the historical sphere and the sphere of language. Language is the current running throughout the three, but it is Kant's treatment of aesthetics that Gadamer initially focuses on and which particularly marks his own work as well. Before elaborating on that, it will be useful to recapitulate the argument Gadamer makes about how Kant's sense of aesthetics confronted that of his contemporaries, who essentially argued from the other side of the hermeneutic divide where the issues of hermeneutics were still based around textual 'regions.'

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<sup>27</sup> Routledge History, 298. Paul Crowther poses Kant's problem for us in ethical terms: 'how can an assertion of our subjective response lay claim to a priori, as opposed to merely private, validity?' The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art. (1989). 60.

<sup>28</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer. Truth & Method. (1989). 258-59. (Hereafter T&M)

Gadamer's critique of Kant does not so much contend with him over specific details in his philosophy (though it does that as well) as it does with its entire tenor, as is evident in his remark:

If we now examine the importance of Kant's Critique of Judgement for the history of the human sciences, we must say that his giving to aesthetics a transcendental philosophical basis had major consequences and constituted a turning point. It was the end of a tradition, but also the beginning of a new development. It limited the idea of taste to an area in which, as a special principle of judgement, it could claim independent validity – and, by so doing, limited the concept of knowledge to the theoretical and practical use of reason. (T&M, 40)

Gadamer argues that Kantian philosophy, particularly the Critique of Judgement imposed Cartesian reason systematically onto humanity in all of its personal and social ethical relations. Just as Cartesian science had produced in Isaac Newton a mechanistic view of the universe in which physical bodies behaved according to certain immutable but invisible universal 'laws,' Kant's anthropological Cartesianism elevated a form of reason, a single governing principle without discernible prejudice, to the status of the divine fiat. He called this principle the 'categorical imperative.' As his Critique of Practical Reason famously expresses it in one instance, 'Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law.'<sup>29</sup>

If Gadamer's argument about Kant is correct, his great achievement in uniting the empiricist and rationalist schools of thought<sup>30</sup> is a rather pyrrhic victory. The obliteration of distinction as a constituent part of human judgement in order to allow this unity to occur only came, according to Gadamer, at the cost of the integrity of the moral sense tradition. Indeed Gadamer seems to place great value on the Roman philosophical tradition of England and the Romanesque countries, that of the *sensus communis*, in the spheres not lying within the natural sciences. Gadamer claims that this tradition is particularly well represented in the philosophy of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713):

According to Shaftesbury, the humanists understood by *sensus communis* the sense of the general good, but also 'love of the community or society, natural affection,

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<sup>29</sup> As Roger Scruton points out, the problem that Kant's categorical imperative encounters is in attaining 'objective necessity,' since he defined it by its lack of 'empirical conditions,' its isolation from the antecedent interests of the subject. Thus while Kant argues we *ought* to affirm it, he can give no proof for it. This proof was to be provided by the Transcendental Deduction, 'but Kant did not provide this Transcendental Deduction; instead, he devoted the second Critique to an examination of metaphysical questions which, while enormously influential, left the gap between his metaphysics and his morals unclosed.' A Short History of Modern Philosophy. (1991). 154. This 'gap' of course is the source of the contemporary *aporia* that Gadamer and Ricoeur devote much of their hermeneutics to attempting to resolve. Interestingly, Kant's failure to provide a Transcendental Deduction seems to be matched by Coleridge's failure in Book 13 of the Biographia Literaria. The difference is that Coleridge's failure there, I shall argue, is a deliberate failure of reasoning, and a reversion to the dogmatics of the Christian faith, the unifying *tertium aliquid* he refers to in his philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> Scruton, op. cit., 140-41.

humanity, obligingness.’ They adopt a term from Marcus Aurelius, *koinonoemosune* – a most unusual and artificial word, confirming that the concept of *sensus communis* does not originate with the Greek philosophers, but has the stoical conception sounding in it like a harmonic. (T&M, 29)<sup>31</sup>

This intellectual and social virtue of sympathy which Shaftesbury refers to is, according to Gadamer, an ancient Roman concept contained within the word *humanitas* itself.<sup>32</sup> He defines it as a ‘refined *savoir vivre*, the attitude of the man who understands a joke and makes one because he is aware of a deeper union with his interlocutor.’<sup>33</sup> It is this tradition in which philosophers succeeding Shaftesbury such as Hutcheson and Hume developed their moral sense philosophy, generally noted as the counterpart to the ethics of Kant. Gadamer notes that this tradition was not the prevalent one in Germany:

...the supplanting of pietistic tendencies in the later eighteenth century caused the hermeneutic function of *sensus communis* to decline to a mere corrective: that which contradicts the consensus of feelings, judgements and conclusions, i.e. the *sensus communis*, cannot be correct. In contrast to the importance that Shaftesbury assigned to the *sensus communis* for society and state, this negative function shows the emptying and intellectualising of the idea that took place during the German enlightenment. (§29)<sup>34</sup>

I shall return to this point of tradition and its importance in Gadamer’s philosophy in a moment, but first I wish to examine his discussion of Kant’s notion of taste.

The concept of taste is crucial to Kant,<sup>35</sup> particularly in the light of his reduction of the *sensus communis* to judgements of aesthetic taste, for it allowed him to introduce the idea of *universal* agreement and hence an a priori justification for criticising taste. Gadamer notes that this removal of the evaluative capacity of judgement is closely tied to political and social changes. These changes prompted a re-interpretation by the Enlightenment thinkers of the intention of a moral idea of education for the Christian courtier as an expression of cynical class interest:

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*. Treatise II, esp. part III, sect. 1. (1773).

<sup>32</sup> Lewis and Short’s *Latin Dictionary* provides us with this definition of *humanitas* in the sense of the word Gadamer intends: ‘Mental cultivation befitting a man, liberal education, good breeding, elegance of manners or language, refinement.’ (869)

<sup>33</sup> T&M, 24. Gadamer notes that ‘Shaftesbury explicitly limits wit and humour to social discourse among friends.’

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer tells us that, in Germany, with the exception of Pietism, the political and social dimensions contained in the concept *sensus communis* were not absorbed because the social and political conditions of England and France, the leading countries of the Enlightenment, were absent. (Cf. T&M, 26-29) To distinguish between the two entirely different senses of ‘common sense,’ it is now common to refer to the sense used in the Roman tradition (and its ‘regional hermeneutics’) as that of the *sensus communis* and that used by Kant as that of common sense, though this is confusing for English speakers who tend to associate both aspects of common sense in common usage.

<sup>35</sup> Jochen Schmidt notes the importance of the concept of taste to Kant’s aesthetics in *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik 1750-1945*. Band 1. (1988).

(Its) ideal of social *Bildung* seems to emerge everywhere in the wake of absolutism and its suppression of the hereditary aristocracy...and is closely bound up with the antecedents of the third estate. It no longer recognises and legitimates itself on the basis of birth and rank but simply through the shared nature of its judgements or, rather, its capacity to rise above the narrowness of interests and private predilections to the title of judgement. (35-36)

Gadamer speculates that it was possible for Kant and others to link the concept of judgement with the *sensus communis* because of the 'intellectualising' of the latter concept as an *a priori* relation of concepts to their objects.<sup>36</sup> He argues that this intellectualising was the first step towards its inevitable oblivion. For the fact that judgement required a higher criterion in order for it to be applied led the thinkers of the German Enlightenment (who did not have a sense of its 'moral sense') to consider it as a lower faculty of the mind.<sup>37</sup> If we look to Britain, where this base intellectualisation of common sense did not take place to such a degree, we see that a far different conclusion was possible. Although the dependence of judgement upon a unifying and validating sort of criterion – and not just a collection of common sensual impressions – is indisputable, the insistence by philosophers such as Hume that moral and aesthetic judgements do not obey reason, but rather have the character of sentiment (or taste), need not thereby give them the relativistic implications that the German Enlightenment thinkers charged them with.

Instead, Hume and the moral sense philosophers asserted that taste is based upon the broader, humanistic notions of the *sensus communis*, which are of a non-rational, though not necessarily irrational nature.<sup>38</sup> These grounds dispute the claims of the pure rationalists, whom Hume castigates for their strict Cartesian understanding of mankind as a coalition of universally certain mental capacities:

(They) consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being, and endeavour to form his understanding more than cultivate his manners...They think it a reproach to all literature, that philosophy should not yet have fixed, beyond controversy, the foundation of morals, reasoning, and criticism; and should for ever

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<sup>36</sup> This intellectualisation meant the entire distancing of judgement from any sensible objects except in the special instance of aesthetic objects. Thus for Kant the true sense of community is not entailed in the judgements about the common sensual world, but rather in the notion of taste, which concerns itself only with these aesthetic 'objects,' subjective projections of an *incorporeal* Cartesian self. This understanding of self as 'spirit' was argued at the outset of the introduction to express the 'universality' of the self.

<sup>37</sup> In the *Critique of Judgement* (hereafter *CoJ*), Kant notes of the faculty of judgement that it must itself 'furnish a concept, and one from which, properly, we get no cognition of a thing, but which it can itself employ as a rule only – but not as an objective rule to which it can adapt its judgement, because, for that, another faculty of judgement would again be required to enable us to decide whether the case was one for the application of the rule or not.' (5)

<sup>38</sup> Hume notes the danger of irrationality in this exercise of taste however: 'Nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers.' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*. (1978). 267

talk of truth and falsehood, vice and virtue, beauty and deformity, without being able to determine the source of these distinctions. (Enquiry, 6)

Hume responds to such philosophers that human nature itself argues against this error:

It seems...that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to (the) human race, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much, so as to incapacitate them for other occupations and entertainments. Indulge your passion for science, says she, but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society.(9)

It does seem rather unfair to Hume, if we read him in light of these statements, to judge his importance according to criteria restricted to defining epistemological boundaries i.e. as a sceptic waiting to be outdone by Kant. For it is obvious from them that his scepticism, albeit extreme, is as much an instrument of restraining the claims of rationalist and dogmatic thinkers as an interest in epistemology per se. Though he may now frequently be judged by philosophers of his own tradition according to his contribution to the sphere of epistemology, in 'curbing metaphysical pretensions,' his reference to 'action and society' would seem to point that his interest lay equally in ethics and expressed an understanding of man as a political being. These concerns lay close at hand to those of this thesis. On the other hand, Hume's sort of arguments needed the extremity of Kant to dissolve their pretensions that such a moral sense could be derived innately from rational principles. Hume's failure in the face of Kant's arguments are the beginning of the call for a defence of moral sense without primary appeal to the senses or subjective reasoning that will grow louder as time passes.

We note the accuracy of Gadamer's observation that Kant failed to understand the nature of the *sensus communis* in section 40 of the Critique of Judgement, in which he discusses 'Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*.' The best way of observing this is again by comparison to Hume. Hume's sense of a certain moral and communal disposition in human nature led him to claim that 'reason ought to be the slave of the passions.' This communal sense led him to argue:

According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by invivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object. It may, therefore, be concluded, that our judgement and imagination can never be contrary, and that custom cannot operate on the latter faculty after such a manner, as to render it opposite to the former. This difficulty we can remove after no other manner, than by supposing the influence of general rules. (Treatise, 149)

On the other hand, Kant's derogatory view of any moral sense that could not attain an absolute status led him to criticise such arbitrary notions as Hume's in an apparently devastating fashion:

The name of sense is often given to judgement where what attracts attention is not so much its reflective act as merely its result. So we speak of a sense of truth, of a sense of propriety, or of justice, &c. And yet, of course, we know, or at least ought well enough to know, that a sense cannot be the true abode of these concepts, not to speak of its being competent, even in the slightest degree, to pronounce universal rules. (CoJ, 150-51)

Statements such as this lead Gadamer to conclude that Kant 'developed his moral philosophy in downright opposition to the doctrine of 'moral feeling' that had been worked out in English philosophy. Thus he totally excluded the idea of the *sensus communis* from moral philosophy.'<sup>39</sup> While Hume's utter enslavement of reason to the 'passions' must certainly held to be dubious as a basis of moral conduct, Gadamer points out the strangeness of Kant's conclusion:

...even if one draws no sceptical, relativistic conclusions from differences of taste, but holds on to the idea of good taste, it sounds paradoxical to call good taste, this strange gift which distinguishes the members of a cultivated society from all other men, a sense of community. In the sense of an empirical statement that would, in fact, be absurd...(33)<sup>40</sup>

What Gadamer I think overlooks here is precisely what Arendt had argued about Kantian reason (*Vernunft*): its characteristic drive for *meaning* beyond all sensible things. He *only* interprets it as a drive for *truth* and thus argues the absurdity of its universal 'prejudice against prejudice.'

Gadamer illustrates another aspect of taste seemingly excluded by Kant's aoristic definition of it. In jurisprudence, the individual case is judged not only according to universal principles but, in accordance with the unique time and circumstances of the case, it also 'co-determines... supplements and corrects'(37) the universal principles themselves by the very act of judgement itself. Moreover, this correspondent relationship is also to be found in morality. Hence judgements are not only, nor even primarily to be found in the evaluation of the beautiful and the sublime<sup>41</sup> in nature and art but 'spread throughout the moral reality of man.'(37) The fact that all general rules are substantiated and also influenced by particular instances of judgement is wholly ignored by Kant. But that aspect of judgement entails that

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<sup>39</sup> T&M, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Kant refers to taste as a critical faculty 'which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of every one else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement.' CoJ, 151.

<sup>41</sup> CoJ, vii.



taste is a requirement in all moral decisions so that 'taste is not the ground, but the supreme perfection of the moral judgement.' (38)<sup>42</sup>

The implications of Gadamer's insights into Kant's philosophy range widely and deeply. Not only does his aesthetics remove the case-specific concepts of taste and aesthetic judgement crucial to jurisprudence and moral judgements, but 'by discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge apart from that of natural science, it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in self-analysis.' (39) This form of 'transcendental analysis' in turn robbed the human sciences of their particular claim to truth, that of the study and cultivation of tradition, and forced them to adopt the methodology of the natural sciences for legitimacy, which did not suit them. In fact, Gadamer claims that quite against Kant's universalist emphasis it is the historical nature of human understanding, laden with tradition, that is particular to it.

This brings us to the final point I wish to discuss in regard to Gadamer's philosophy before moving on to review Ricoeur's interpretation of it, that of the indispensability of *prejudice* to understanding. In contrast to the view represented in the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudices,' (271-85) Gadamer claims in specific reference to Dilthey that there can be *legitimate* prejudices, not of course 'arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought' but those which are possessed in the light of certain expectations that 'are not borne out by the things in themselves':

Working-out appropriate projects, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only 'objectivity' here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterises the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out? But understanding realises its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy – i.e., the origin and validity – of the fore-meanings dwelling within him.... The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (267-69)

This of course is not only an exhortation to learn the basis of one's own culture and the limitations imposed on one's actions by a sense of community, the aim of humanism. It is particularly an attack on the great Enlightenment aim of *freedom*, taken in the sense of *autonomy*, i.e. auto-legislation. That aim 'hinder(s) us from understanding (a text) in terms of

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<sup>42</sup> Gadamer claims that this ethics of good taste contains humanistic components which were present in Greek ethics as well, citing the 'ethics of measure' of the Pythagoreans and Plato and of the mean (*mesotes*) which Aristotle developed. (38)

the subject matter. It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that make us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition.' (269-70)<sup>43</sup> It is with this historicity of our being-in-the-world in mind that we can understand Gadamer's claim that absolute reason is impossible as it 'exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates.' (276)

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<sup>43</sup> Gadamer points out that part of the pre-Enlightenment notion of prejudice was one that could have 'either a positive or a negative value. This is clearly due to the influence of the Latin *praejudicium*.' (270) The Enlightenment critique of religion however reduced this sense of prejudice to being simply an 'unfounded judgement.' He mentions Leo Strauss's Die Religionkritik Spinozas insightful characterisation of the Enlightenment's own prejudice:

The word 'prejudice' is the most suitable expression for the great aim of the Enlightenment, the desire for free, untrammelled verification; the *Vorurteil* is the unambiguous polemical correlate of the very ambiguous word 'freedom.' (163)

While this is indeed true, the claim to truth that actually compelled the Enlightenment was the very ambiguous word 'universal,' the unambiguous polemical correlate to 'tradition,' which Gadamer attempts to resuscitate indiscriminately.

*Paul Ricoeur on Hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Gadamer*

Paul Ricoeur gives a fine thematic interpretation of the field of hermeneutics since Schleiermacher in his Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, which first traces the emergence of an *aporia* in the initial project of general hermeneutics, and then concentrates in particular on the *aporia* that post-Heideggerian hermeneutics purports to address. He presents the historical development of modern hermeneutics phenomenologically, and traces its evolution as a movement to two consecutive phases, which might sketchily be described as quantitative and then qualitative, the processes of *deregionalisation* and *radicalisation*. A good part of the following account is a summary of what Ricoeur has to say about the field of hermeneutics over the period concerned, though I place more emphasis on the influence of the universal perspective within the 'organic turn' of Romantic hermeneutics than he does. The purpose of the following is to trace the main arguments of a series of hermeneuticists and note their evolution towards an ever more consistent universality against the objective differences of the two-world view presented in language, a process completed by Heidegger's exploration of the prejudicial truth of 'inner-worldly being' and his presentation of the project of meaning in terms of truth.

*Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 -1834)*

Ricoeur begins his interpretative history, as most accounts of modern hermeneutics do, with an assessment of Friedrich Schleiermacher's work. It is in his work that hermeneutics emerges as a general process instead of its previous confinement to two 'regionalised' domains of interpretation, the sacred and the secular. Like many recent commentators, Ricoeur shows himself eager to distance his discussion of Schleiermacher from Dilthey's influential but somewhat simplistic portrait of him as a writer promoting psychological empathy with the author's creative personality as it is expressed in his works.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Ricoeur still sees this as the seminal emphasis of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and thus views it as an anticipation of Dilthey. The problems he sees in Dilthey can be traced back to Schleiermacher's original general hermeneutic project, a fact he does not acknowledge. This is an issue I develop more fully in my reflections on Ricoeur's account after this summary history.

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<sup>44</sup> This is the case for example in his famous essay, 'The Origin of Hermeneutics' (1900). Ricoeur notes the importance of the discovery of Schleiermacher's later writings by Kimmerle as the primary impetus for the recent reassessments of his work.

Ricoeur portrays the inherent difficulties with Schleiermacher's attempt to produce a general hermeneutic process for all texts to be connected with his notion of the psyche. The difficulties that stem from that psychological conception come in the form of a dilemma: On the one hand, the *impersonal and transcendental* nature of the subject that Schleiermacher, like his contemporaries, adopted from Kant's investigations of physics and ethics in his first two Critiques was precisely what allowed him to establish that *universal* judgements were possible. The utter devaluation of the objective differences inherent in the Kantian reason provides the rationale and the method for pursuing a general hermeneutic project towards texts. On the other hand, while its evasion of object-derived rules held great promise for overcoming the pedantry that so often typified Neo-Classical criticism, such an evanescent concept of a human being was self-defeating. It allowed no interaction with specific instances, cases or texts because the *transcendental subject* gave it no common ground for doing so with them.

Quite against what one might expect, the result of the application of a Kantian form of the subject to the hermeneutical encounter of texts by Schleiermacher meant that the encounter operated according to a *biased* critical process, albeit a bias towards transcendence. This happened by applying the notion of taste that Kant presented, idiosyncratically at the time, but thenceforth as an article of common sense:

Hermeneutics was born with the attempt to raise exegesis and philology to the level of a *Kunstlehre*, that is, a 'technology' which is not restricted to a mere collection of unconnected operations.' (H&HS, 45)

The mere collection of 'unconnected' operations whose restrictions Schleiermacher's interpreter was able to overcome were of course the very ones *connected* to the sensible world and explained by the two previously regionalised interpretative domains of Classical and Biblical writing. The removal of the distinction between the regions only in fact took place because their connection to the sensible world was no longer of pre-eminent concern to a subject conceived in Kant's transcendental terms.

Schleiermacher's *Kunstlehre*, which Ricoeur notes is the crucial element of his hermeneutics, was a direct reflection of Kant's <sup>anthropology, the</sup> transcendental philosophical basis for his aesthetics which afforded him the primary means for accessing a common psychological ground. Gadamer summarises Kant's significance to its development:

In his critique of aesthetic judgement what Kant sought to and did legitimate was the subjective universality of aesthetic taste in which there is no longer any knowledge of the object, and in the area of 'fine arts' the superiority of genius to any aesthetics based on rules. Thus romantic hermeneutics and history found a point of contact for their self-understanding only in the concept of genius, validated by Kant's aesthetics... The transcendental justification of aesthetic judgement was the basis of

the autonomy of aesthetic consciousness, and on the same basis historical consciousness was to be legitimised as well. The radical subjectivisation involved in Kant's new way of grounding aesthetics was truly epoch-making. In discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge except that of natural science, it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualising themselves. But it made this reliance easier by offering the 'artistic element,' 'feeling,' and 'empathy' as subsidiary elements. (T&M, 41)

Two effects particularly significant to Romantic hermeneutics are to be observed in this. Firstly, there is a common factor of *transcendence* uniting three different aspects of the aesthetic experience. Transcendence is contained: i) in the *creator* of the work of art, since the *genius* is understood as a law unto himself; ii) in the definitive *form* of his aesthetic creation, since the *sublime* was similar in being a form that transcended all means of understanding or formulation; iii) in the *critical perception* of the genius's creation by the enlightened observer's *taste*, since that was also marked by a transcendence of rules. Secondly, even at this early stage the description of Schleiermacher and his successors' general project to be one of *textual* hermeneutics is almost absurd, for 'the text' as a literary artefact can no longer be said to be the true area of interest. The recovery of the author's intention is the primary concern, which necessitates reading in the 'same spirit' as the author.

Even what is coined understanding (*Verstehen*) can only be called textual, if one is being precise, in so far as it leans on an analogy (of decreasing similarity) with the previous sense of interpretation as an act of textual engagement. In and of itself, the written word is of entirely secondary interest to Schleiermacher and his successors. Perhaps the growing dominance of the term 'hermeneutics' over its previous designation as 'interpretation' signifies the shift in the dynamics of the activity better than any other distinction. Ricoeur claims Schleiermacher's hermeneutics took 'from Romantic philosophy its most fundamental conviction, that mind is the creative unconscious at work in gifted individuals.' (H&HS, 46) That conviction of course did not stem from Romantic philosophy at all, but rather from Kant. But its consequence is startling, particularly for someone thinking within Descartes' and Kant's parameters and accustomed to thinking them *universally valid*: the *general* textual hermeneutic was immediately *reduced* or, depending on how one looked at it, *elevated* to the provenance of a few individuals by the apotheosis of the poet's *genius* and the true critic's *taste*. Whether one regards the effect of the embrace of universality as an impoverishment or an achievement, in either instance its horizons were ironically *restricted* by the transcendence of finite human (and textual) horizons to a common basis in subjectivity. The sense that was common was not so common after all.

Even if Ricoeur does err somewhat in isolating the source of this change, he keenly perceives how this transcendence had the ironic effect of frustrating attempts to unify the processes of critiquing and understanding any given *text*. He calls this divergence the 'double filiation' of the contradictory critical and Romantic impulses within a general procedure:

The proposal to struggle against misunderstanding in the name of the famous adage 'there is hermeneutics where there is misunderstanding' is critical; the proposal 'to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself' is Romantic.<sup>45</sup>

The division of these two processes in a general hermeneutics leaves the abiding legacy of the *aporia*. For what Schleiermacher effectively proposed were two processes whose connection was to say the least ambiguous, but whose mutual antagonism within a general procedure was not in the least ambivalent. Each process warred against the other in favour of its own particular transcendence and also demanded its due for the hegemony its respective form of transcendence merited. Schleiermacher called these two forms of interpretation 'grammatical' on the one hand and 'technical' or 'psychological' on the other, distinctions that remained constant in his work for all their conceptual reformulation.

I shall only mention the fascinating problem that emerges in Romantic and post-Romantic hermeneutics by breaking with the past understanding of interpretation as an engagement with a writer's *language*, as was characteristic of the two forms of 'regional' hermeneutics, and replacing it with an engagement with his *mind*, as it has been ever since. The focus of this change was upon the issue of origin or authorship. Prior to the Romantic period, language was a common heritage which one received as a possession and used to communicate with one's fellow creatures. 'Creative' or 'original' were adjectives only applicable to poets *secondarily* or derivatively from the fact that they themselves had been created, *in imago Dei*, and (as *the* *poet*) had acquired through education a shared communal form of understanding. Originality was not necessarily and in fact rather infrequently the sign of a good artist. Certainly it was not a definitive characteristic. The poet's goal was excellence or technical virtuosity, not prophetic vision. But from the Romantic period onwards, *language itself* came increasingly to be understood not as a legacy or as an acquisition or even as a tool, but *primarily* as a means of expressing what one *was*. The medium was the message that was the artist. This is a function of *the* organic model that they adopted to explain the world of appearances. It is little wonder then, given its introspective Cartesian anthropological model, that the moments of greatest self-expressiveness in Romantic poetry were those of transcendence or *silence*. In fact, the emphasis on *transcending* the inherited quality of

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<sup>45</sup> H&HS, 46. One could add as well to this 'double filiation' the beginning of the separation of the poet from the critic.

language and its relation to the historical and material world became somewhat of a crusade. The claim associated so strongly with the Romantics of the artist's divine creative powers reflected adherence to a common belief that Kant's transcendental subjectivity had provided a means of access to a higher plane of being.<sup>46</sup>

This subjective or 'psychological' authenticity came however at a high price. For in the apparent *increase* in the power of language to express what they conceived language to be used for, that is the expression of a self that transcended *external* regulation, language concomitantly *lost* its power to lay claims upon 'objects' i.e. it effectively lost its naming function. And along with loss of this nominal power of language, the aim of a Romantic hermeneutics to recover the intention of the author was also undercut by the devaluation of the common ground of understanding in objective reality.

The consequences of this, however difficult they are to assess, are formative for the course of post-Romantic hermeneutics. Without some sort of substantive interconnection to an already existent world, i.e. one not simply understood in terms of <sup>a</sup>process of *becoming* but rather of *being*) even the language that 'informed' the 'creative subject' had no real content in its information (except, again, by allusion to the traditional use of and emphasis on language in connection to the existing world that it had broken with). The 'reality' of the subject was in fact set up in antagonistic opposition to the objective world, and to the detriment of the reality perceived to inhere in that world. This is the basis for the Romantics' belief in the power of the artist to create a truer expression of reality than that given to him by the senses. It testifies as much to the lack of reality perceived to be in the objective world as to their own powers to perceive that world. It also locates a repeated problem for subsequent hermeneutics: the problem of *defining what a text is* if the subject that *understands* that text is transcendental or can claim a 'universal perspective,' i.e. not understand as a creature who exists, but rather as an evolving organism. It is thus that the problem of the *aporia* in modern general hermeneutics can be seen primarily to be an *anthropological problem*, not an interpretative one.<sup>47</sup> The interpretative problems of language that define the emergent field of hermeneutics for the next two hundred years wallow in the *aporia* of an 'inauthentic' transcendental subjectivity of 'inner-worldly being.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> M.H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) remains perhaps the best survey of the quasi-religious character and expression of the (post) Romantic period.

<sup>47</sup> This is what the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg argues in his *Anthropology from a Theological Perspective* (1985), which takes the German 'pre-Romantic' Herder as the point of departure for modern philosophical anthropology.

<sup>48</sup> The mistaken retreat to 'inner-worldly being' is part of Hannah Arendt's discussion in Chapter 2.

Along with the problem of defining precisely what could be understood as a text for a transcendental self, one of the great ironies of the Romantic poetics of expressiveness is that it claims to be *certain of understanding* this self and its ability to access other selves transparently. The assumption derived from Cartesian thinking was that the mind could *know* with certainty what it accessed, as long as it encountered that 'reality' within its own thoughts. This was thought possible because of the organism's biological connection to the external world. The belief resulted in the creation of a hermeneutics dependent upon the *certainty* of understanding. Once again, this understood a drive for meaning in terms of truth or, if you will, reason in terms of understanding.<sup>49</sup> But this understanding was anything but certain because transcendental subjectivity's removal of the naming function of language (and its connection to objective reality) also removed any comprehensible, let alone certain, sense in which understanding could be said to take place. 'Understanding,' while a seminal concept for the hermeneutics in the legacy of Schleiermacher, therefore remains a confusing designation of something that always remains biased towards a transcendental, ideal subject. The problem in hermeneutics is in understanding what is meant by understanding.

But these objections make the entire exercise sound completely debilitating and they could not have gone unnoticed at the time. How was communication perceived to be possible if the common world of things was removed from consideration and language's reference to that world was subverted, it might be asked? The answer to this must be sought in the fact that Schleiermacher, like Wilhelm von Humboldt, believed that a psychological interconnection between individuals was possible because of a common substratum of sense or understanding lying beneath the sediment of the various types of world languages. Initially, and again probably because of the propensities of previous paths of thinking, the assumption was that this would take the form of a primordial language. The power of this shared conviction prompted a great explosion of learning in the search for an 'original' or Indogermanic language behind all known languages in the nineteenth century, which bore a strange sort of correspondence with the search for an Adamic language in the Renaissance. The possibility of finding such a language has now largely been debunked.<sup>50</sup> However, in accordance with the organic model, it still exists in the odd form of the search for a 'genetic-code' of life. Organicist thinking, and the search for meaning in terms of truth, are still prominent in contemporary thought.

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<sup>49</sup> Again, this Arendt's thesis in *The Life of the Mind* (1975).

<sup>50</sup> Though George Steiner's *After Babel* (1998) bears witness to the association by a Heideggerian of a pre-linguistic quest with this search for an 'original language.'



One final thing is worth noting about these processes of linguistic scrutiny and psychological empathy in Schleiermacher's work. Although the two processes had equal status in his work, what he made clear was that they were not simultaneously practicable. Even the relation of individuals to a *common language* was in some way undermined by the transcendental subjectivity of the artistic genius. They merely coalesced in the transcendental ground of two entirely different planes. As Kurt Mueller-Vollmer writes, 'Schleiermacher's concept of the author... is not a fixed substance... but rather something fluid and dynamic, something mediated, an act rather than a substance.'<sup>51</sup> One could say that two *new forms* of regional hermeneutics began to live separate lives, while continuing to give the impression of sharing one house:

Schleiermacher makes this clear: to consider the common language is to forget the writer; whereas to understand an individual author is to forget his language, which is merely passed over. Either we perceive what is common, or we perceive what is peculiar. The first interpretation is called 'objective', since it is concerned with linguistic characteristics distinct from the author, but also 'negative', since it merely indicates the limits of understanding; its critical value bears only upon errors in the meaning of words. The second interpretation is called 'technical', undoubtedly due to the very project of a *Kunstlehre*, a 'technology.' The proper task of hermeneutics is accomplished in this second interpretation. (H&HS, 47)

As the nineteenth century progressed, the successors of Schleiermacher's initial foray into a general hermeneutics were mainly confronted with the problem of *understanding history* and assimilating it into a general hermeneutics. The teleological views of history of Hegel and Marx offered one attempt at doing so; the more objectivist academic school of Leopold von Ranke and his followers offered another. These cannot be explored in any detail here. The work of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gustav Droysen offered a third way, one that attempted to align Schleiermacher's linguistic conception of a Kantian form of understanding (*Verstehen*) (which was actually developed more explicitly as such by Humboldt)<sup>52</sup> with the study of history. For both men, the craft of the historian was like that of the artist in that both required acts of the creative imagination to unite the individual parts they surveyed into a living whole.

### *Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 - 1911)*

Dilthey's importance in the history of hermeneutics is primarily marked by his expansion of the breadth of Schleiermacher's general hermeneutic horizon to account for the dimension of history, but not quite as his predecessors had. Dilthey's speculation must be understood as a response to the often explicit attacks made upon the intelligibility of the

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<sup>51</sup> Mueller-Vollmer. *The Hermeneutics Reader*. (1994) 10.

<sup>52</sup> Mueller-Vollmer. *ibid.* 16.

humanities by the positivist thinkers at the turn of the last century. He attempted to defend the integrity of what he came to designate as the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) from attacks upon their intelligibility by their rivals in the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). In this defence, he took on the methodology of its critical attackers. This was, as Ricoeur explains it, 'the only way of rendering justice to historical knowledge...to give it a scientific dimension, comparable to that which the natural sciences had attained.'(49)

This allowed him to create an understanding of history that vied with those of the natural sciences as a science. His inversion also meant that the understanding of what the text itself *was* underwent yet another change: 'the text to be interpreted was reality itself and its *interconnection* (*Zusammenhang*).'<sup>53</sup> But the methodological path that Dilthey took was one that would lead to a dead end, for in undertaking to 'endow the human sciences with a methodology and an epistemology which would be as respectable as those of the sciences of nature,' he adopted the familiar neo-Kantian approach of understanding the humanities in an individualistic (universalistic) fashion (detached from the *sensus communis*), even when seeing them in the area of social relations.

The deep current that runs throughout Dilthey's attempt to answer the question of how human self-knowledge is possible can best be appreciated in the conceptual distinction he drew between the means of thought in the natural sciences, which he called explanation (*Erklären*), and that in the human sciences, understanding (*Verstehen*). This distinction encapsulated the reason for its dead end however, for the very distinction that permitted a claim of scientific objectivity for the human sciences was one that severed it from all links with nature. Whereas the domain of natural knowledge was in some sense incomprehensible because it was other than mankind, Dilthey claimed that the case was different with man's study of man. However alien a person or culture might be, the knowledge of man was never as alien as such things were. This claim, if it were true (and Nietzsche, Heidegger and their successors would seriously question it), would elevate the human sciences claim of knowledge to a status even above that of their rival in the sciences of nature. However with this claim, Ricoeur states plainly, the human sciences were 'thrown back into the sphere of psychological intuition.'(49)

Psychological intuition of course required some sort of reification in order to be perceived at all, and it is for that reason that Dilthey brought forward the importance of

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<sup>53</sup> H&HS, 48.

*interconnection*. The interconnection between man and the world was perceptible because man's 'inner life' manifested itself in forms: 'feelings, evaluations and volitions (which) tend to sediment themselves in a *structured acquisition* [*acquis*] which is offered to others for deciphering.' (50) Texts thereby had the subordinate status of the dead letter to the primacy of the revitalising power of the living, enquiring spirit:

The organised systems which culture produces in the form of literature constitute a second layer, built upon this primary phenomenon of the teleological structure of the productions of life. (50)

Thus while this spirit of past life in texts can be perceived as a sort of psychological sediment, in Dilthey's system the human sciences' enquiry always already revolves around its contemporary moment, and the only differences between present and past seems to be the durability of the former. This means that:

Universal history thus becomes the field of hermeneutics. To understand myself is to make the greatest detour, via the memory which retains what has become meaningful for all mankind. Hermeneutics is the rise of the individual to the knowledge of universal history, the universalisation of the individual. (52)

Dilthey's work thereby makes even clearer the *aporia* present in Schleiermacher's work in subsuming the understanding of texts within an understanding of the author's psychology.

Ricoeur explains the *aporia*:

If the enterprise remains fundamentally psychological, it is because it stipulates as the ultimate aim of interpretation, not *what* a text says, but *who* says it. At the same time, the object of hermeneutics is constantly shifted away from the text, from its sense and reference, towards the lived experience which is expressed therein... in the last analysis, the conflict is between a philosophy of life, with its profound irrationalism, and a philosophy of meaning, which has the same pretensions as the Hegelian philosophy of objective spirit. Dilthey transformed this difficulty into an axiom: life contains the power to surpass itself through meaning. (52)

It is his claim that this hermeneutics of life *is* history that is incomprehensible, and not just because it removes without warrant a distinction between life and history (i.e. a lived life) that seems necessary to human thought. It is also clear that the objectivity of this knowledge depends on its no longer being lived or experienced by anyone. The sort of Cartesian comprehensibility that Dilthey seeks requires the interconnection of works to life to have *stopped* in order to obtain its objectivity, which is clearly an impossible stipulation. In order for it to operate then, it must, as Ricoeur says, 'place speculative idealism at the roots of life, that is, ultimately to think of life itself as spirit (*Geist*).' (53)

Ricoeur thus sees Dilthey's great accomplishment ironically to be inherent in his *failure* to have provided the human sciences with its own methodology. The failure brings forward a conception of life as spirit grasping 'life' with its life. This is a step forward for

Ricoeur because he thereby points in the ontological direction of Heidegger and Gadamer's enterprises, where the immanence of life transcends mere historicity '*without*,' he claims, '*invoking a triumphant coincidence with some sort of absolute knowledge.*' (53) This only becomes possible for them though because of what he calls their 'second Copernican inversion' of Schleiermacher's initial, subjective view of hermeneutics. In this second 'inversion' questions of method are subsumed by 'the reign of a primordial ontology.' (54)

### *Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976)*

Ricoeur suggests that the fundamental question that Heidegger attempted to answer is what the *meaning* of being was.<sup>54</sup> According to his line of argument, a relation between subject and the world does not first get established, as Descartes claimed, on the level of 'cognition' or 'knowledge.' Instead, by 'virtue of our very existence i.e. our 'being-in-the-world', we possess what Heidegger called a 'pre-ontological understanding' of the world (of 'being'). Heidegger therefore redefines understanding not so much as a mode of 'knowing' as one of 'being.' If the initial movement from Schleiermacher to Dilthey in creating a general hermeneutics was primarily epistemological and its methodology Cartesian, the main body of hermeneutics since the time of Heidegger has given up that project and subsumed 'questions of method to the reign of a primordial ontology.' In this primordial ontology, as Ricoeur notes, a new question is raised:

Instead of asking 'how do we know?' it will be asked 'what is the mode of being of that being who exists only in understanding?''<sup>55</sup>

What the change in orientation that Ricoeur likens to a 'second Copernican inversion' – to Schleiermacher's first – essentially brings about is the *return* to the great mystery surrounding man and his origins, but it places the meaningful answer in the organic processes of the world.

The question of the meaning of being itself acts much like the *aporia* that Ricoeur traced back to Descartes and saw running throughout the entire general hermeneutic project. For the consistent centrality of that question in Being and Time functions to *defer* the concern

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<sup>54</sup> The formulation of the problem in these terms is almost unavoidable, but it already construes Heidegger's primary emphasis on pre-linguistic understanding somewhat towards a secondary (logocentric) concern in a way he probably would not have. What Heidegger in his consistency wanted to know was what the *being* of being was. The fact that we nonetheless *desire* to know the answer about its *meaning* I think mitigates against Heidegger's own claim to present our being authentically and argues his own process of thinking to be 'alienating,' not in its transcendence as was the case with Descartes but in its *immanence*.

<sup>55</sup> H&HS. 54.

for *factuality* (or *interconnection* if one is looking at the issue more broadly) typical of an epistemological approach to the more urgent question of the meaning of what it is looking for. The questioning is therefore a self-reflective (or self-expressive) process seeking the *mode* of (human) being that encounters being. Heidegger's (deferred) answer to that question is contained in the rather cryptic description of the human condition as *Dasein*, the *being-there that we are*, which also provides us with an explanation of how we interact with it: 'not (as) a subject for which there is an object, but rather... (as) a being within being.' 'It is part of its structure as being to have an ontological *pre-understanding* of being.' This structure appeared to allow Heidegger to break the Cartesian mould in his philosophy, for 'to display the constitution of *Dasein* is not at all 'to ground by derivation'' – as was the case in the Cartesian subjective model and 'the methodology of the human sciences' – but 'to unfold the foundation by clarification.'"(54)

His achievement, real or perceived, was of great significance for his successors as it enabled them to redefine the field of hermeneutics by basing the practice of the human sciences on his primordial ontology. It promised to link Dilthey's isolated processes of explanation and understanding and the search for meaning with the immanent concept of truth. Just to clarify the relation between his speculation and that of his predecessors as he saw it, he describes in this passage the Cartesian cogito as an instance of ontological openness, but one that only distinguished itself from others by being of the greatest individuation, not by its transcendence:

The fundamental philosophical theme of being is no progeny of being, and yet it affects every being. Its 'universality' is to be sought at a higher level. Being and its structure imposes itself before every possible specific instance of being. *Being is simply transcendence*. *Dasein's* transcendence of being is exceptional in so far as it contains both the possibility and necessity of the most radical instance of *individuation*. Every disclosure of being belonging to transcendence is *transcendental insight*. *Phenomenological truth (openness of being) is veritas transcendentalis*.<sup>56</sup>

The significance of his demonstration of the priority of being to the moment of Cartesian doubt is that it showed that 'the *Cogito* is within being, and not vice versa.'<sup>57</sup> This seemed to allow it to overcome the crisis that Western thought had undergone through the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of Cartesian universality, or, as expressed in terms more central to Heidegger's thought, through its 'highly inauthentic way of being.'

<sup>56</sup> S&Z. 38. (my translation)

<sup>57</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*. (1969). 352.

This first inversion of epistemology to ontology brought about another in its wake. As we have seen, Dilthey in particular had isolated the hermeneutic problem to be in gaining access to another mind and finding its meaning. This became the problem that dominated all of the human sciences of the post-Enlightenment period, from the field of psychology to history. But Heidegger strangely, if consistently, made little attempt to resolve that problem of communication. Instead, in the process of abandoning the Cartesian aesthetic of individuation as a basis for human understanding, he wholly separated the question of understanding from the problem of *communicating* with others (which was that of *understanding* other individuals). As we repeatedly witnessed, this had been the source of the problem for the *Geisteswissenschaften* – there was no common ground in the Cartesian *cogito* for this understanding to take place. The *cogito*'s 'anthropology' had neither form or substance – and the organic model adopted by the Romantics merely included the processes of life as functions of this process of thought. Instead of now recovering that common ground for understanding by reverting back to the notion of personal agency, what Heidegger decided to do was to seek the foundations of the ontological problem 'in the relation of being to the world and not in the relation with another.'<sup>55</sup>

Heidegger thus appears to have been instructed by Dilthey's methodology, even if he chose not to follow its psychological intention. As was also noted earlier, Dilthey had made the rather naïve presumption, in following a Kantian line of argument and taking a rosy Enlightenment view of human rationality, that human nature was less obscure to us than was non-human nature. His rationale for that presumption was that our knowledge of things runs up against the unknown, whereas our knowledge of individuals does not because 'in the case of mind there is no thing-in-itself: we ourselves are what the other is.'<sup>55</sup> Heidegger was under no such illusions about human nature and therefore sought his common ground not in it, or in an original language, but in a 'natural' understanding of humanity i.e. in consonance with 'being.' His choice was no doubt influenced, Ricoeur suggests, by Nietzsche's equation of life with being, who had argued against Cartesian rationality on such terms:

(Heidegger) knows that the other, as well as myself, is more unknown to me than any natural phenomenon can be. Here the dissimulation no doubt goes deeper than anywhere else. If there is a region of being where inauthenticity reigns, it is indeed in the relation of each person with every other; hence the chapter on *being-with* is a debate with the 'one', as the centre and privileged place of dissimulation. It is therefore not astonishing that it is by a reflection on *being-in*, rather than *being-with*, that the ontology of understanding may begin; not *being-with* another who would duplicate our subjectivity, but *being-in-the-world*.... In thereby making understanding worldly, Heidegger *de-psychologises* it. (55-56)<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Communication with others remains a problem even if Dasein is Mitsein. For by making 'the being there that we are' (a translation already personalising Heidegger's impersonal expression) equivalent to

It is crucial to note that despite removing the *aporia* of psychological understanding caused by the imperious demand of transcendence against human finitude, Heidegger ironically continued to apply such a demand for man in relation to the earth, and posited the common ground *in its immanence*, as if man were merely a part of the life-forces of nature. However, the assumption he makes of that relation is just as naïve as was his predecessors' view of human psychology. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that the evidence of the study of mankind shows that the place of mankind in the world is not so simplistically natural as Heidegger's ontology would have it to be in offering the model of 'openness to the world.'<sup>59</sup> 'Openness' is indeed, he argues, characteristic of mankind, but it is not to be equated with an uncomplicated 'natural' interaction. Whereas the animal species is 'limited to its environment that is fixed by heredity and that is typical of the species,' (4) man is not bound in that way. It is not just a matter of a greater complexity of the human organism, it is a unique drive for ever-greater openness that marks man out. This is man's characteristic prejudice, he suggests:

If our destiny (*Bestimmung*) did not press us beyond the world, then we would not constantly search further, as we do even when there are no concrete incentives. (8)<sup>60</sup>

For Pannenberg, this characteristic drive directs us in the same direction that Kant's *Vernunft* had, towards meaning, i.e. God. 'Men's dependence on God is infinite precisely because they never possess this destiny of theirs but must search for it....(and therefore) the messages of the religions are to be tested on the basis of whether they conceal the infinite openness of human existence or allow it to emerge.' (11)<sup>61</sup>

Hannah Arendt also suggests that the model suggested by 'openness to the world' takes one form of activity, which mankind shares with the rest of the animal world, as a

'being with,' specifically human plurality is not thereby introduced. Human plurality, as Arendt shall argue in the next chapter, is the very condition that allows for *personality* and individual distinctiveness because it, being in the terms of agency, allows for action. What separates man from the beasts is his capacity for individuality (rather than his mere species character), a capacity which is only apparent when he discloses himself in the midst of his peers. The human condition of plurality allows the disclosure of the *agent*, not the world. The world is already there, however uncertain its being is, but the individual is not apparent as such until he discloses himself.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective. (1970).

<sup>60</sup> *Bestimmung* has the senses not only of 'orientation towards a goal' and of 'destination', but also contains the connotation of the word 'voice' (Stimme) that itself has the dual character of condition and possibility.

<sup>61</sup> In this respect, Pannenberg notes that it is no accident that a theologian, Johann Gottfried Herder, stands at the beginning of the modern anthropological movement. The genealogy of modern anthropology with its idea of 'openness to the world' can be traced back to Christian theology and the ideas of the transcendence of God, the dominion of man over creation and the emancipation of man from it.

model while ignoring far more characteristic 'human' forms of action. I shall outline her objections to Heidegger's ineluctable *logic of anti-logic* below. A somewhat crude way of understanding what Heidegger's phenomenology proposes is to understand human 'worldliness' and human *understanding* to have little if any distinction from human biological *life*. This after all was the real purpose of Heidegger's 'existential' demonstration, not the expression of some sort of angst that it has often been misinterpreted as:

It was not sufficiently recognised that these analyses are part of a mediation on the *worldliness of the world*, and that they seek essentially to shatter the pretension of the knowing subject to set itself up as the measure of objectivity. What must be reaffirmed in place of this pretension is the condition of *inhabiting* the world, a condition which renders situation, understanding and interpretation possible. Hence the theory of understanding must be preceded by the recognition of the relation of entrenchment which anchors the whole linguistic system, including books and texts, in something which is not primordially a phenomenon of articulation in discourse. We must first *find ourselves* (for better or worse), *there* and *feel* ourselves (in a certain manner), *even before* we orientate ourselves... *Thus arises understanding – but not yet as a fact of language, writing or texts. Understanding too must be described initially, not in terms of discourse, but in terms of the 'power-to-be.'* (56)

Heidegger's 'thrown project' of *Dasein* can thus perhaps be understood to guide all of humanity's activities, even their linguistic and logical ones. Again it holds great promise to solve a problem that plagued his predecessors, the separation of the means of understanding, language, in all of its tendency to encompass and name, from inner being. Prior to him the hermeneutic circle in a general hermeneutic schema was invariably also a vicious circle, because the subject and object were so mutually involved in the interpretative process that determining which had determined what *first* had become an impossible task. By that means a subjective attempt to establish *truth* had always failed. But Heidegger argues that this *Dasein* fulfils a function useful as a basis for successful, if necessarily limited hermeneutic thinking. It is a sort of *pre-understanding* (*Vorverständnis*) given by life prior to the givenness of language in the present or the past. The 'anticipatory character' of his pre-understanding allows us to make certain a priori assumptions about a being that understands historically, even prior to the enactment of such a process. This *pre-understanding* also becomes the basis for Gadamer's claim to be able to promote a true notion of prejudice without any necessarily pejorative sense:

For a fundamental ontology...prejudice can be understood only in terms of the anticipatory structure of understanding. The famous hermeneutical circle is henceforth only the shadow, on the methodological plane, of this structure of anticipation. Whoever understands that knows, from now on, that 'what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.' (58) (S&Z, 153)



### *The new aporia?*

It is notable that Heidegger's mediations in *Being and Time* have no principal bearing on the interpretation of discourse, let alone of texts. The issue of language in relation to being is in fact intentionally entirely secondary to his discussion in it and when it does appear it is in the form of assertions (*Aussage*) derived from the *pre-understanding* and explication of 'being.' How we can *know* that this pre-understanding functions as it does, let alone construe it as *true without the antecedent* ideas of agency and the aid of language to support *its logic* remains unclear to me. Leaving that reservation aside for the moment, Heidegger maintains his logical consistency against the Cartesian paradigm (but includes agency in it) by insisting that these assertions of pre-understanding have the functions not of 'communicating to others, nor even attributing predicates to subjects, but rather 'pointing out,' 'showing', 'manifesting' (58) (S&Z, 154; B&T, 196).

It is therefore necessary to situate discourse in the structure of being, rather than situating the latter in discourse: 'Discourse is the 'meaningful' articulation of the understandable structure of being-in-the-world' (58) (S&Z, 161; B&T, 204)

This 'reversal' as Ricoeur calls it removed the last vestige of communicative function remaining from the regional systems of hermeneutics of language. This time it happened in regard to language as a whole, the point at which no further deprejudicing could occur. The analysis of Cartesian logic completed its process of eradicating the verbal logic of the pre-modern age. That eradication meant, as Ricoeur notes, that the first level of determination for Heidegger in understanding defied the ordinary, linguistic manner of understanding by not being of speaking, but rather of listening or keeping silent: 'Hearing is constitutive of discourse' (59) (S&Z, 163; B&T, 206).

Despite Heidegger's apparent removal of the Diltheyan *aporia*, Ricoeur, like Arendt and Pannenberg, thinks that what really happened was that it was transposed elsewhere 'and thereby aggravated.' Rather than being evident in the incommensurability between the two modalities of knowing within epistemology, that of explanation for the natural and understanding for the human sciences, after Heidegger the *aporia* becomes more solipsistic:

It is no longer between two modalities of knowing *within* epistemology, but it is *between* ontology and epistemology taken as a whole. With Heidegger's philosophy, we are always engaged in going back to the foundations, but we are left incapable of beginning the movement of return which would lead from the fundamental ontology to the properly epistemological question of the status of the human sciences. (59)

Instead of being simply in conflict with the method of the sciences as it was before, the universal philosophy of life derived from Heidegger has been rendered utterly incapable of

addressing anything but itself. In other words, the 'universal perspective' in the initial hermeneutic project has been universalised by Heidegger to include the Cartesian 'critical' moment, rather than to distinguish itself from it: Heidegger's view has become completely 'Romantic.'<sup>62</sup> That is to say, as Arendt's argument towards the end of the next chapter implies, he understands life as being. This has other consequences as well. For it is only in a logical connection to the world, which Ricoeur characterises as the connection of ontology to epistemology, that the veracity and efficacy of Heidegger's ontology can be demonstrated. As it stands, it seems, somewhat ironically, logically coherent but impotent. Ricoeur's final and somewhat understated comment may in fact be his most interesting one: 'So long as this derivation (from ontology to epistemology) has not been undertaken, the very movement of transcendence towards questions of foundation remains problematic.' (59) On the contrary, it does not remain problematic, it remains utterly invalid.

### *Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 - present)*

Heidegger's pupil Gadamer's central concern is to resolve the new *aporia* created in his mentor's philosophy while simultaneously trying to avoid falling back into the old one. Ricoeur argues that what we saw demonstrated in his discussion of Kant and the Enlightenment's deletion of the old *sensus communis* and distortion of the notion of taste towards transcendence also holds true for his work as a whole:

The core experience around which the whole of Gadamer's work is organised, and from which hermeneutics raises its claim to universality, is the scandal constituted, at the level of modern consciousness, by the sort of *alienating distanciation* (*Verfremdung*) which seems to him to be the presupposition of these sciences. For alienation is much more than a feeling or a mood; it is the ontological presupposition which sustains the objective conduct of the human sciences. (60)

Gadamer attempts to restore a sense of belonging against the methodical distanciation brought about by universal doubt by invoking Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* and the inevitability of its prejudice. He does so in three areas: the aesthetic sphere, the historical sphere and the linguistic sphere.

In these three spheres Ricoeur argues that Gadamer expresses a synthesis of the two 'movements' he regarded as typical of hermeneutics since Schleiermacher, the movement

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<sup>62</sup> Ricoeur, as was noted earlier, noted the source of the *aporia* in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to lie in the divergence he called a 'double filiation' of the contradictory critical and Romantic impulses within a general procedure:

The proposal to struggle against misunderstanding in the name of the famous adage 'there is hermeneutics where there is misunderstanding' is critical; the proposal 'to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself' is Romantic. *H&HS*, 46.

from a regional to a general hermeneutics and the movement from the epistemological aim of the human sciences to an ontological one. His efforts are concentrated in legitimising Heidegger's ontology by applying it to epistemological problems. He notes of Truth and Method, that 'the very title of the work confronts the Heideggerian concept of truth with the Diltheyan concept of method.' (60) However the question that continues to overshadow such a venture is whether this procedure will only lead him to combine one *aporia* with another, thereby aggravating the problem, rather than eliminating both. Ricoeur alludes to the possibility that two *aporias* have inadvertently crept into Gadamer's work: 'The question is to what extent the work deserves to be called *Truth AND Method*, and whether it ought not instead to be entitled *Truth OR Method*.' This seems to me a direct result of Gadamer's acceptance of Heidegger's basic error in thinking that the *truth* of the prejudices of biological life can function as *meaning* – he assumes that *meaning* can be methodically derived from *Dasein*.

Gadamer's methodological intention explains the preoccupation he shows in much of Truth and Method with presenting the historical objections to the Cartesian prejudice of universality against the worldly truth-claims of the humanities, to the detriment of the latter. Thus he recapitulates in succession 'the struggle of Romantic philosophy against the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment], of Dilthey against positivism, of Heidegger against neo-Kantianism.' (61) Gadamer's own history of the methodological battle is in fact exemplary of the sort of understanding he proposes for the critical human scientist. He calls his prescribed consciousness of the historical development of methodology *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, a '*consciousness of the history of effects*.' Ostensibly, Gadamer purports to present a more or less traditional defence of the special truth-claims of the humanities. In fact, his work is not simply a defence of *tradition*, but rather of the *methodology of the defence of tradition*.

The problem that Gadamer quickly encounters in defending methodologies of the human sciences *generically* as a category alternative to the Cartesian paradigm of alienation stems from the universal basis <sup>of immanent being</sup> he decides to establish that generic defence upon, Heidegger's historicity of being. A problem emerges there because the very sense of 'belonging' to history Heidegger proposes means, as Ricoeur rightly points out, that he cannot be critical of it. For since this consciousness of historical effect cannot be *objectified*, we being in that consciousness simultaneously *actors of history and the effects of its acts*, the sort of truth-

claims he wishes to claim in this 'belonging' are instantly undercut.<sup>63</sup> History cannot be its own historian any more than the reverse.

The only means of avoiding this dilemma and allowing a combination of truth with critical thinking, Ricoeur suggests, is by combining in this historical consciousness not just a repudiation of distanciation, but also an assumption of that distance. There are three ways in which Ricoeur suggests Gadamer's hermeneutics already does this. He points out that that element of *distance* is already in fact present in our very *consciousness* of effective history. Knowing (and I would say naming) is always in some sense also objectifying, and knowing history perhaps more distanced still by the sense of alienation brought about by historical change: 'There is thus a paradox of otherness, a tension between proximity and distance, which is essential to historical consciousness.' (61) [The relativity of this distance shall not be made an issue here]

Similarly, this paradox or 'dialectic of participation and distanciation' is also present in Gadamer's notion of the *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Even if a synthesis of the Hegelian sort is impossible for an historical creature, his finitude is not thereby demonstrated to isolate him solipsistically. For in every encounter of a living being, the horizon of the individual is either contracted or expanded in some manner. This has the concomitant implication that there are differences (and therefore distances) that Heidegger's ontology did not really develop of its own accord. The mutability of human horizons signifies for the subjective perspective, as Ricoeur notes:

that we neither live within closed horizons, nor within one unique horizon. Insofar as the fusion of horizons excludes the idea of a total and unique knowledge, this concept implies a tension between what is one's own and what is alien, between the near and the far; and hence the play of difference is included in the process of convergence.(62)

Finally, Ricoeur suggests that the most plausible demonstration of distanciation *within* Gadamer's insistence of belonging to tradition is found in his philosophy of language. The sheer *linguality* of human experience (Ricoeur's translation of Gadamer's *Sprachlichkeit*) means that 'belonging to a tradition or traditions passes through the interpretation of the signs, works and texts in which cultural heritages are inscribed and offer themselves to be

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<sup>63</sup> The assumption that Gadamer makes is that methodologies that offer an alternative to the Cartesian paradigm of alienation can be lumped together generically as the antithesis of alienation i.e. as paradigms of 'belonging.' But as both Pannenberg and Arendt argue, the truly traditional notions of the Classical and Biblical 'regional domains' combined these aspects of belonging and critical distance without such an analytical division between them. Moreover, there are crucial distinctions between the two domains that cannot be reduced to his generic notion of 'tradition,' a designation that, it should be noted, owes its lack of discrimination of the past to the universal perspective.

deciphered.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, the integrity of the inherited understanding of the past itself should maintain a position of exegetical governance, which includes exegetical restraint upon arbitrary, disingenuous or purely self-interested manipulation by an interpreter. That tradition is part of what he calls 'the dialogue that we are,' which we enact even when seeming to abandon it. On the other hand, tradition only functions as a transcendent medium because the words in it remain when the interlocutors themselves have passed away – this is the development from *Sprachlichkeit* to *Schriftlichkeit*, 'in other words, where mediation by language becomes mediation by the text.' The objectivity or 'the matter of the text,' demonstrated by the simple fact that in having been created it *escapes* the control of its author and its reader, allows the sort of communication at a distance also required for criticism to take place.

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<sup>64</sup> This notion of *Sprachlichkeit* of course flies in the face of precisely what Heidegger had claimed to be the order of language to experience, i.e. that Being discloses itself to us *before* language as it is conventionally understood. Ricoeur noted this himself:

From *Being and Time* onwards, *saying* (*reden*) appears superior to *speaking* (*sprechen*). 'Saying designates the existential constitution, whereas 'speaking' indicates the mundane aspect that lapses into the empirical. Hence the first determination of *saying* is not *speaking*, but rather the couple *hearing/keeping silent*.' (58)

*Reflections on Ricoeur's account of modern hermeneutics*

There are two immediately striking things about Ricoeur's account of modern hermeneutics. The first is that his summary takes even less account than Gadamer's did of the reason why hermeneutics prior to the Romantic period had been divided, as he terms it, regionally. Gadamer had at least obliquely brought the legitimacy of one half of the foregoing hermeneutic tradition into consideration, as we saw in his discussion of Kant and the moral sense tradition. Implicit in that discussion was the relation of Kantian philosophy to the competing Classical tradition of the *sensus communis*. Gadamer demonstrated that Kant misunderstood that tradition when he rejected it and the notion of taste related to morality out of hand as the products of lower judgements deferring to a higher, yet unnamed faculty. Gadamer's study thus at least *pointed to* an area of concern surprisingly neglected by a universal rationalist system, the inherently communal and social aspect of human existence, addressed for instance by a system of ethics and values based on a *sensus communis*.

In the end of course Gadamer's exposition did not actually engage with the rationale for the regionalisation of hermeneutics either; nor did it provide any justification for labelling the two regions of interpretation indiscriminately as he did with the generic term 'tradition' – other than one that could itself be ascribed to a Kantian 'prejudice against prejudice;' nor did he present a convincing argument for a concept of *truth* that could account for the differences between varying senses of the 'communal' in the post-Classical world. Although that demonstration of truth was central to his project in Truth and Method, the *sensus communis* alone cannot bear the weight of meaning he associates with truth, however we may construe the criteria for such a claim in the humanities to be different from that which is applied in Cartesian science. For there are many communal senses in the world that surely cannot be reduced to one by an appeal to the senses humans have in common – not even if they are 'universalised' in the form of the Kantian categories of space and time. These are just a few of the problems picked up by his critics and the many postmodernist writers who have construed his defence of tradition in a way that he appears not to have intended.<sup>65</sup>

The second thing that is striking about Ricoeur's account is that he interprets the general project of hermeneutics as primarily epistemologically motivated. He even understands Heidegger's ontology, the apparent hiatus in the period, as a means for a more radical implementation of the epistemological imperative. There may be more truth in this

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<sup>65</sup> As the social pragmatists such as Richard Rorty have for example, who have understood communal sense to admit a sort of Nietzschean radical polyvalency. They have understood meaning as nothing but a 'social construct.'

than was at first apparent in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. My observations of Schleiermacher were directed at his remarkable attempt to connect his mind organically with other minds and in particular at the grounds of his belief that it lay wholly within his capacity to do so. This reflected, I suggested, as much the conviction of certainty of Descartes as it did of Kant, who certainly did have epistemological intentions in proposing his 'Copernican turn.' Schleiermacher's was a typical expression of the confidence of the man of the Enlightenment in his own reason, a confidence that led him to abandon the uneasy relation he had with nature, of which he was a part, and rule over it and the world. Kant's transcendent subjectivity provided the hope of certainty that this power was indeed possible for the humanities just as it appeared to be in the natural sciences.

Kant's subjectification of transcendence furnished Schleiermacher and his successors with the method for eventually viewing all of reality as a 'text.' Initially in the 'generalisation' of hermeneutics the text to be interpreted was that of the mind – a transparent text for one who assumed that there was a common substance within minds. But even at the outset of that movement there was an insoluble conflict between the philological and psychological moments of interpretation. The words of the writer were both the means of and the medium for accessing that mind, which was a problem for a hermeneutics that considered *immediacy* to have been delivered to it by Kant's universal transcendental subjectivity. It is a problem that incited the deconstructive tendency of Romantic poetics, but the organicist notions of process masked it as a demonstration of creativity, conceived in the terms of the life-processes themselves.

In Dilthey's hermeneutics his predecessors' failures were keenly felt, yet their claims were only even more boldly stated for that: for him the text to be interpreted was 'history' or 'context,' which was understood as reality itself and its *interconnection (Zusammenhang)*. Dilthey's attempt at establishing the certainty of the human sciences alongside its natural rivals prompted him to universalise the individual psychological problem, the factor which marked 'the rise of the individual to the knowledge of universal history,' in other words to construe hermeneutics as he did 'the universalisation of the individual.' (H&HS, 52)

By that stage, the question that was no longer ever asked was whether any statement by an author was *meaningful*, so long as it was *true to experience* as conceived in the metanarrative of organicism. Instead, the focus of interpretation was directed at the *relation* of the hermeneutic problem to *history* or to the demonstrations of a personified 'history' conceived in evolutionary terms: either it was a look at the *past* relative to the author, in which case it perhaps entailed a search for the influences of predecessors on the author; or it

was a look at the author's *present*, in which case it might involve a search for the consistency of one statement or work with another in an author's literary corpus or the place of this work in a stage of the author's development (or in the general history of thought); or it was a look at the *future* relative to the author, in which case it might involve a search for how an author affected 'his successors' or, more contemporaneously, how often he had been misunderstood by scholarship, what the current state of criticism was on the author, or even what was 'the present state of the question' about the author.

### *Regional to general hermeneutics*

To my mind the greatest failure of Ricoeur's phenomenological representation of hermeneutics consists in his failure to comment on the significance of the shift from two textual regional hermeneutics to a subjective general hermeneutics. It is also the most striking thing about his account, and only made more so because it distinguishes itself by perceptive evaluations of the changes within the general movement. Since Ricoeur himself notes that the *initial* change is really the fundamental one, a more evaluative assessment of what precisely had made it fundamental might have been expected. As it stands, Ricoeur's argument about the initial stage ushered in by Schleiermacher is that it was fundamental *because* it was general. This however seems to be discredited by his later account of the *radicalisation* of the movement by Heidegger. Was it just hyperbole in claiming the original movement to be fundamental? If it was, does this not radically question the claims for the progress made by embracing universal transcendental subjectivity? If not, in what sense are we to understand Heidegger's philosophy?

Ricoeur is no doubt sensing an important development in Heidegger's phenomenology. However, if the hermeneutics characterising the period running from Schleiermacher to Dilthey was problematic because it omitted such a radical dimension as Heidegger's, then it seems only plausible that this may have been lost in the original move from 'regional hermeneutics.' Without a more serious assessment of those regions, that possibility cannot be dismissed. The omission of such a discussion seems that much more puzzling since Ricoeur clearly demonstrates that the result of following the initial general hermeneutic movement was the *aporia*, repeated in various ways: by the divide appearing between explanation and understanding, between physics and ethics, in the emergence of the two cultures debate, or however else one wishes to describe it. This demonstration of an omnipresent *aporia* in general hermeneutics<sup>is</sup> in fact the cornerstone of his argument and it remains even in Heidegger's ontology, as he notes.



An obvious hypothesis for this development was presented in the introduction. The general hermeneutic movement has repeatedly failed precisely *because* it recapitulates the organicist metanarrative towards all texts as an 'ideal' without discriminating between them. This could also be described as its adoption of a universal perspective with correspondingly absolute values – the absolute value of life. After all, Gadamer's main point in exposing the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice' was to show how it had, by making subjectivity to be the general ground of all thinking, *inappropriately* enacted an implicit prejudice against all substantial forms of reality – including the humanity it purported to serve. He argued that the Cartesian 'subject's' oxymoronic transcendent 'ground' would admit no (inter)connection of its own to anything that had an appearance, while it also simultaneously acted to undermine the *sensus communis*, for which such an interconnection was crucial.

If Gadamer's observations about the Kantian 'prejudice against prejudice' are correct, it is logical to assume that it was at the point when divine texts and human texts were regarded generically as 'texts' and when the text was subordinated to the subjective understanding of the reader, that the *aporia* emerged. Along with that emergence, the possibility of *meaningful* truth-claims slowly vanished. For the *distinctive* characteristic of a sacred text was to be from God and therefore *meaningful* – all texts can in a sense be true (the new criterion). The consequences are quite immense. Once the distinctions of meaning between texts in terms of their authority and origin had been eradicated by the unambiguous application of a highly ambiguous form of human subjectivity by Schleiermacher (one in which agency is strangely absent), there were no *substantive* objections to be made to a general hermeneutic movement – until it did not function. Nor however are there any *substantive* objects – the text becomes as 'absent' as does the Kantian 'subject' or 'author' – they all become at best phenomenal appearances. This is an issue with dynamics I first raise in the next chapter, the fundamental human condition of plurality as a condition for individuality and the disclosure of the agent. However, it does not receive fuller treatment until Coleridge's assertion of the terms of the primary imagination in the Biographia Literaria, which I discuss in detail in the third chapter. The terms of the primary imagination, 'the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM,' those of divine revelation, are those which are the basis for *meaningful* truth-claims. They cannot be treated as 'a text' like any other and be subjected to the terms and conditions of the finite mind.

And there can be little doubt that what Gadamer recounts of Kant and the Enlightenment is precisely what did transpire with regard to texts in the general hermeneutic movement. A process of subordination analogous to that which occurred toward the objective world in Kantian natural scientific epistemology also occurred toward the undistinguished

objective entities of 'the text' (or 'literature') in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Both of these processes came about through the adoption of the 'universal perspective' in modern thinking. As Ricoeur points out, Schleiermacher's 'subordination of the particular rules of exegesis and philology to the general problematic of understanding constituted an inversion *fully comparable* to that which Kantian philosophy had effected elsewhere, primarily in relation to the natural sciences.' (H&HS, 46) It is only all too plausible then that the adoption of this same universality is the cause of the *aporia* and the reason for its insuperability in the general hermeneutics following Schleiermacher. And if this failure was inherent in transcendental enquiry, it might be questioned how these problems could be avoided so long as the transcendental or (what is the reverse side of the same coin) immanent subject (as Heidegger presents it) remained the *critic and criterion* of textual evaluation, of the text's *meaning*.

The possibility that this expression and agenda of transcendence had failed to assimilate a dimension included in the regional hermeneutics of the past should at least have been addressed, if not rebutted, if Ricoeur still wished to advocate a general course of hermeneutics. The reason it was not of course is that Ricoeur understood *both* regional domains to have been discredited by Gadamer's failure to provide truth for the common sense tradition. But this failure came about because he understood both domains to derive their ultimate authority from *tradition*, in other words from an undifferentiated past seen through the eyes of universal history. The accident of history that renders the two regions equivalent in so far as they are 'historical' is no rationale for such an equation. The equation represents a failure to discriminate between them and an unwarranted application of the Enlightenment universal prejudice towards the past. And there can be little doubt that an appeal to tradition *per se* constitutes nothing like a certain sanction of orthodoxy or action even within these traditions. In fact, much of the Biblical account records precisely the opposite, the perversion of divine intention by God's chosen people and their pursuit after 'dumb idols.'

What is clear is that without such a discussion, Ricoeur's attempts to continue pursuing a general hermeneutical model for dealing with all texts seems to fumble about. I am not particularly concerned to trace out Ricoeur's own suggestion for modifying this hermeneutics in his theory of the symbol, for lack of space if nothing else. What I was more concerned to do was to discuss how his history quite ably traced the ironic development of an irresolvable *regionalisation of processes within a purportedly general hermeneutics*. By not *engaging* with what he calls a regional hermeneutics, let alone conceding it to contain some sort of necessary truth (as Gadamer in some sense did), Ricoeur has been led precisely to that ironic outcome. For his history of the course of general hermeneutics following

Schleiermacher depicts a perpetuation of regionalised and *sundered* processes by a whole series of 'general hermeneuticists.'

The irony of that outcome is only heightened when one also recognises that the process thus depicts the creation of a *new region* of hermeneutics, i.e. one *regionalised* in the Cartesian subject conceived as an organism, *limited in its application* to some of the characteristics of the writing <sup>of the</sup> post-Enlightenment era and *characterised* by the Enlightenment hermeneutic model of the transcendence of prejudice. In the process, this hermeneutics could be characterised as isolated from one particularly important region, that which in relation to the alienating universality of Cartesian anthropology is most fittingly called 'the human.' However, the great irony of this isolation of the human is that it takes place in the terms of an embrace of life as the greatest good. To examine how this evolution transpired, we must look to Hannah Arendt's contribution to the hermeneutic debate in The Human Condition.

## Chapter 2 Hannah Arendt's study of the human condition

I have decided to include a summary discussion of Hannah Arendt's work and in particular her magisterial treatment of the *vita activa*, The Human Condition, at this point in the thesis for a few reasons. Firstly, since the Cartesian anthropological model seemed decisive in influencing the development of modern hermeneutics, it seemed important to look to a study that would assess the subject of anthropology philosophically but without regarding the anthropological question as a concern that began with Kant and Schleiermacher. Secondly, since modern hermeneutics has a decidedly different orientation than its forebears, it seemed to me that in order to gain any sort of critical perspective upon the issues involved in interpretation that would not merely recapitulate the assumptions of modern hermeneutics, a broader historical perspective needed to be taken. Arendt's study was useful on both accounts.<sup>66</sup> Finally, it seemed to me to provide a plausible rationale for the abandonment of the two-world scheme and the division of hermeneutics into two different regions, the sacred and the secular: the contemporary assumption of life as the greatest good. This is a decidedly important theme in Wordsworth and his contemporaries' writing, so it seemed necessary to provide some sort of historical-critical context for a hermeneutic engagement with it, the subject matter of the final three chapters.

The Human Condition is written in a style and manner that is too idiosyncratic to be summarised easily, let alone immediately consolidated into the coherent themes of the previous discussion of hermeneutics. I cannot recapitulate the distinctions she makes, the various sources she draws upon or the breadth of the observations she takes hundreds of pages to argue. Nonetheless, there are many important contributions she makes to the discussion of hermeneutics that are worth repeating, even if it were only for the fact that she offers a perspective on the central issues of hermeneutics that is different than that of the writers who are more typically designated 'hermeneuticists.' The difference is perhaps surprising because Arendt also came from the German philosophical tradition and indeed was even a protégée of Heidegger's. Perhaps only her experience of being a Jew living in Germany in the period leading up to the Nazi era can explain the combination of intimate acquaintance and radical divergence that marks the intellectual path she takes away from her mentor and her peers and their emphasis on life taken as being. This can be seen by way of contrast with Gadamer for

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<sup>66</sup> What Seán Burke (The Death and Return of the Author. (1998)) notes of Foucault's history in The Order of Things holds true of the relationship of Ricoeur's study (and most other contemporary hermeneutic accounts) with respect to anthropology: they occur without a discussion of teleology, aetiology and influence essential to the concepts. I think this is due to their adherence to organicist premises, which must eschew such notions.

instance on the subject of tradition. Although Gadamer had provided a contemporary appeal to recognise its importance, Arendt's appeal is far more radical (and more genuine) because it offers a more strictly traditional 'Classical' critique of the contemporary. It may not be entirely wrong to suggest, as one critic has, that she aims to propose 'a kind of New Athens.'<sup>67</sup> For the sake of the following, I shall attempt to tailor her account to issues that directly relate to the general hermeneutic movement and to her comments on Romanticism, without entirely losing the breadth of her discussion.

To understand the distinctiveness of The Human Condition's contribution to hermeneutic debates though, one must first pay attention to how it differs in the way it treats its subject matter from the manner that is typical of its genre. The first thing to recognise is that The Human Condition is primarily intended to be an exploratory *political* work that dovetails with her earlier work on the origins of totalitarianism.<sup>68</sup> In that earlier account, Arendt had demonstrated that totalitarianism was a nihilistic process motivated by paradoxical convictions: 'on the one hand the belief that 'everything is possible' and on the other that human beings are merely an animal species governed by laws of nature or history, in the service of which individuals are entirely dispensable.'<sup>69</sup> The same observations that guided that earlier account of totalitarianism also inform the argument of this later work about the development of Cartesian introspection through organicism. Arendt argues that a serious misapprehension of human capacities and responsibilities is at work in contemporary thinking and it is often based on the same paradoxical convictions as totalitarianism. She traces the root of this problem, much as Vico and Gadamer had done, to the retreat of the *sensus communis* and the two-world view in the face of the Cartesian 'inner form' of common sense, introspection.

### *The alogia of Cartesian introspection and Heideggerian being*

However, to understand how Arendt can maintain that a political study can constitute a credible engagement with the problems of this advance of Cartesian introspection – a belief which encapsulates the range of differences that run between her study and Gadamer's (and the project of general hermeneutics) – one must look carefully at how the terms by which she

<sup>67</sup> Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition. (1998). *Introduction*, viii. (Hereafter THC)

<sup>68</sup> 'Shortly after the book's publication, Arendt herself described *The Human Condition* as 'a kind of prolegomena' to a more systematic work of political theory which she planned (but never completed). Since 'the central political activity is action,' she explained, it had been necessary first to carry out a preliminary exercise in clarification 'to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labour and work.' THC. ix.

<sup>69</sup> ibid. xi.

understands politics relate to basic hermeneutic issues. Hers is not a work of 'political philosophy as conventionally understood: that is to say, offering political prescriptions backed up by philosophical arguments.'<sup>70</sup> Instead it is 'political' in the sense truest to the etymology of the word.<sup>71</sup> It calls for a return to political action, which turns out to be nothing other than a call to *discuss* what is being done in the world and act, rather than to cede passively to dogma of the necessary amelioration of the processes of life. This appeal would seem to have hermeneutic implications. Arendt's account provides an explanation for the *aporia* that appeared in the project of general hermeneutics in tracing the adoption of universality, the Archimedian point of perspective, into all branches of human thinking and acting. And she also gives a reason why the general hermeneutic movement took hold when it did: as we shall see, the radical questioning of the notion of causality by Hume combined with the normalising processes of society made the process of introspection seem applicable to the human condition at the outset of the nineteenth century, particularly to thinkers strongly influenced by the Enlightenment. The universality of the general hermeneutic world-view prompted it to adopt a non-linguistic and 'biological' criterion of truth, i.e. the 'mind' of the author as its aim of 'interpretation.' As we shall see in evidence in later chapters, it was typical of the 'universal perspective' to see the mind itself as nothing other than a place through which an 'everlasting universe of things' flows, as the beginning of Shelley's *Mont Blanc* puts it.

What she understands by political philosophy then is the study of human interaction in a very basic and yet also very distinctive sense in which human plurality, communication, and action are central. She traces a process of political and hermeneutic alienation in the retreat of common sense and a common world of action before the increasing dominance of

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<sup>70</sup> *THC*. ix.

<sup>71</sup> The entire second section of the book deals with the political realm and various aspects of the distinction between the public and the private realms, particularly of the deeply entrenched misunderstanding of the political realm as equivalent to the social. Arendt explains that the *polis*, the Greek city-state, was founded to enable men to spend their whole lives in the political realm where action and speech were coeval and equal:

Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon politikon* was not unrelated and even opposed to the natural association experienced in household life; it can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zoon logon echon* ('a living being capable of speech'). The Latin translation of this term into *animal rationale* rests on no less fundamental a misunderstanding than the term 'social animal.' Aristotle meant neither to define man in general nor to indicate man's highest capacity, (he) only formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis* – slaves and barbarians – was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other. (27)

While not calling for a return to such a political system, her book calls for a recognition of the validity of the word for human affairs and as the only means by which human understanding, however limited it may be, can be achieved.

the Cartesian universal world-view. Arendt's apparently improbable thesis is that it is the changes in the world of human activity that have been the decisive factor upon the changes that have taken place in human thinking (which includes the general hermeneutic movement with which we are here concerned).

As I argued in the introduction of the thesis, if only one crucial event could be held responsible for the spiritual and intellectual development of the modern age, it was Galileo's discovery that the universe was heliocentric.<sup>72</sup> Two things were remarkable about that discovery:

Firstly, the *means* by which the discovery took place and by which the old geocentric cosmology was overthrown was particularly telling, i.e. it happened through the use of a technical device, the telescope. In and of itself, that demonstration of the senses' inadequacy was not extraordinary. The truth of the world that the senses revealed had always been held in suspicion by Christian and Classical thinkers. But in this instance the senses' inadequacy had not been *argued* as it had been before for instance by the ancient Sceptical philosophers, it had been demonstrated. The very fact that it had been demonstrated without argument had the far more significant consequence of also making its 'testimony' quite literally *indisputable*. This type of certainty meant that Galileo's discovery was far more important than Copernicus's compatible theory (which actually preceded it).<sup>73</sup>

For the telescope's achievement not only undermined trust in the veritude of the senses and discredited the prevailing point of view, it also implicitly undermined the *hegemony of language* over human affairs, in particular over human judgements. Henceforth, in order to be certain, one could no longer passively contemplate the eternal truth of the invisible world in its correspondence with the visible world, as the contemplative tradition of

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<sup>72</sup> She suggests that there were two other decisive factors in the birth of the modern age as well, the discovery of America and the ensuing exploration of the whole earth and the Reformation, which began in appropriating ecclesiastical possessions a twofold process of individual expropriation and accumulation of social wealth. But she assigns particular prominence to this one for its effect on the development of introspection and the adoption of the universal world-view.

<sup>73</sup> Cardinal Bellarmine pointed out to Galileo that what he had *done* and what Copernicus had *argued* had entirely different significance: 'to prove that the hypothesis...saves the appearances is not at all the same thing as to demonstrate the reality of the movement of the earth.' Arendt comments:

By 'confirming' his predecessors, Galileo established a demonstrable fact where before him there were inspired speculations. The immediate philosophic reaction to this reality was not exultation but the Cartesian doubt by which modern philosophy – that 'school of suspicion,' as Nietzsche once called it – was founded, and which ended in the conviction that 'only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.' (Bertrand Russell) (260-61)

the Greek and Christian tradition had established. In order to achieve certainty, one now had to *make sure* and in order to do that, one had to be *active*:

Certainty of knowledge could be reached only under a twofold condition: first, that knowledge concerned only what one had done oneself – so that its ideal became mathematical knowledge, where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind – and second, that knowledge was of such a nature that it could be tested only through more doing. (290)

To see how important this was we must look ahead several centuries to the rationale for eventually abandoning the regionalisation of hermeneutics in sacred and secular categories and embracing a hermeneutics that reflected subjective or, as Arendt would characterise it, universal thinking. In that rationale, we can see that both regions were subject to the opprobrium of the *universal turn* against all forms of appearance and the promotion of a criterion other than language, i.e. the mind of the author. This could only happen after the differences between the two ‘regions’ were regarded as insubstantial, if not inconsequential, which is to say once the witness of language itself was no longer decisive in achieving truth and once the new form of ‘analytical’ truth seemed to promise more than *meaning*. The significance accorded to truth in fact became virtually indistinguishable from a claim of meaning. Once that conclusion had been reached, it was immaterial whether a text was held to be of divine or of human origin:

Since then, scientific and philosophic truth have parted company; scientific truth not only need not be eternal, it need no even be comprehensible or adequate to human reason. It took many generations of scientists before the human mind grew bold enough to fully face this implication of modernity. If nature and the universe are products of a divine maker, and if the human mind is incapable of understanding what man has not made himself, then man cannot possibly expect to learn anything about nature that he can understand. He may be able, through ingenuity, to find out and even to imitate the devices of natural processes, but that does not mean these devices will ever make sense to him – they do not even have to be intelligible. As a matter of fact, no supposedly suprarational divine revelation and no supposedly abstruse philosophic truth has ever offended human reason so glaringly as certain results of modern science. (290)

Secondly, Galileo’s discovery was significant because it provoked and inspired Descartes’ remarkable reaction. Descartes alludes to the influence of the prejudicial effect of the telescope on his own step of universal doubt:

...I before received and admitted many things as wholly certain and manifest, which yet I afterwards found to be doubtful. What, then, were those? They were the earth, the sky, the stars, and all the other objects that I was in the habit of perceiving by the senses. But what was it that I clearly [and distinctly] perceived in them? Nothing more than that the ideas and the thoughts of those objects were presented to my mind.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> René Descartes. ‘Meditation III. Of God: That he exists.’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (1987). A parallel passage is to be found in his famous second meditation in which he finds his Archimedean



The 'method of doubt' that Descartes embarks upon following this anecdote has often been misunderstood by historians of philosophy as a reaction against the re-appearance of the superior sceptical arguments of Sextus Empiricus into modern European thinking.<sup>75</sup> But these sorts of sceptical arguments, however prolific they undoubtedly were at the time, surely only became popular because a ground of uncertainty had already been created for them to proliferate.<sup>76</sup>

The way in which Descartes' universal doubt 'considered the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe'(248) was exemplified by his method of analytical geometry. Geometry prior to Descartes was a branch of mathematics that, as its name suggests, concerned itself with the earth and its measurement. Inherent in Descartes' treatment of space and extension however was his conversion of these accidents of the natural world into patterns identical with human mental structures, irrespective of their natural appearance or form, so that 'its relations, however complicated, must always be expressible in algebraic formulae.' Algebra 'freed the mind from the shackles of spatiality.' When Descartes counterbalanced this mathematisation of spatiality by also demonstrating that 'numerical truths...(could) be fully represented spatially,' the combined result was astounding. For the effect of these demonstrations was that:

A physical science had been evolved which required no principles for its completion beyond those of pure mathematics, and in this science man could move, risk himself into space and be certain that he would not encounter anything but himself, nothing that could not be reduced to patterns present in him. (266)

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point in the *cogito*, after persuading himself that 'there was no sky and no earth, neither minds nor bodies.'

<sup>75</sup> The typical explanation given for Descartes' extreme scepticism is the discovery of manuscripts presenting the arguments of intellectual scepticism. Cf. Richard Popkin's thesis in The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza. (1979) His adoption of the *cogito* is thus interpreted as a *linguistic response* – the intellectual equivalent of burning part of a forest prophylactically to prevent a conflagration.

<sup>76</sup> This ground of uncertainty can be seen more clearly in another tendency from the period. It was a similar recognition that also incited the seventeenth century scientist/ philosophers to pursue a methodology of 'trial and error' against the dictates of tradition, particularly that of Aristotelian science. It inspired the corporate motto of the Royal Society of 'things, not words.' It is facile to suggest that a reaction of this magnitude (and formulation) to 'tradition' could have been incited by the mere reappearance of sceptical arguments. Arendt suggests that there were several noteworthy aspects of the Royal Society: i) its 'objectivity' was a function of its willingness to subject itself to the King; ii) since no scientific *teamwork* is pure science but also has a motive of empowerment (because organising always involves *the intention to act*), whether in gaining place in society or in dominion over nature, science became a political institution, acting in concert, introducing quasi-political *action into thought*. iii) this introduction of action into thought was the basis of the enormous successes of the Royal Society, influenced the character of modern thinking, organisation. 'Organised thought is the basis of organised action.' (271)

Newton and Leibniz quickly followed Descartes in their own methods of fulfilling the philosophical preoccupation of 'saving the appearances;' and Kant later was famous for providing the aptly named 'Copernican turn' that established Newton's findings into philosophy.

Although Arendt's insistence that Descartes' adoption of a 'universal world-view' that implicitly attacked the world of the senses and of language can be traced to the implications of Galileo's discovery is surprisingly coherent, it does not lead her to overstate its philosophical significance. She warns of two dangers to be avoided that many scholars have fallen into when interpreting the *cogito*. On the one hand, the hasty conclusion that the *cogito* resulted in some sort of revelation of true *being*, something like Plato's realm of ideas that bore a correspondence to geometric particulars must be avoided. For it is clear that:

These are no longer ideal forms disclosed to the eye of the mind, but are the results of removing the eyes of the mind, no less than the eyes of the body, from the phenomena, of reducing all appearances through the force inherent in distance.(267)

On the other hand, the opposite conclusion must also be firmly rejected, thinking that there were no ontological implications involved in Descartes' *cogito* at all. This is what Nietzsche concluded when he remarked that it Descartes' *cogito* contained a logical error. Rather than *cogito ergo sum*, Nietzsche claimed that Descartes formulation should have been *cogito, ergo cogitationes sunt*.<sup>77</sup>

In response to Nietzsche's claim that Descartes did not succeed in providing an ontological proof in the *cogito* but had only demonstrated <sup>the</sup> certainty of his thoughts (cogitations), Arendt submits that while in one sense that is true, he did not, historically speaking, establish the certainty of his thoughts either. That understanding in fact makes Hegel's mistake of interpreting what Descartes and Kant did by making everything an element of the 'universal spirit.' Rather, Descartes, by attempting to 'save the appearances,' preserved contemplation in the face of something he considered to be a threat to it. But the cost of preserving it changed it beyond recognition.<sup>78</sup>

### *The importance of Cartesian introspection*

There were two primary reasons, she suggests, why Cartesian introspection and its response of 'universal doubt' was crucial to the spiritual and intellectual development of the

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. No. 484. (1968).

<sup>78</sup> More importantly, he provided a demonstration that subsequent discoveries based on the universal perspective have only more clearly revealed, that mankind's origins could not lie in the created universe.

modern age: i) it established an introspective *process* – the stream of consciousness – as the basis for confronting the world of appearances. ii) it led mankind to the conclusion that a *method* of universal certainty had been provided that could deliver knowledge based on the invention of new devices. These reasons do not immediately appear to be ‘political’ either, but have implications that, as we shall see, indubitably become so. The implications of these aspects of the *cogito* can be traced and elaborated upon:

*i) The analogy of processes*

Submerging all worldly objects into a stream of consciousness that was isolated from that world by the premise of universal doubt was crucial for the advance of science. It created an intellectual model conducive to the later understanding of the dissolution of matter into energy, for example, and to the understanding of objects as a whirl of atomic occurrences. However, the downside of this model of process appeared as soon as it was applied to humanity, when, to use Arendt’s terms, the ‘move of the Archimedean point into the mind of man’ was applied reflexively by Descartes and, more systematically, by Kant.<sup>79</sup> The changes that the application of the model of process brought there were most evident in the prominence that certain activities attained at the expense of others.

Most significantly, it caused a change that affected all human activities, ‘the reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*’:

...the fundamental experience behind the reversal of contemplation and action was precisely that man’s thirst for knowledge could be assuaged only after he had put his trust into the ingenuity of his hands. The point was not that truth and knowledge were no longer important, but that they could be won only by ‘action’ and not by contemplation. It was an instrument, the telescope, a work of man’s hands, which finally forced nature, or rather the universe, to yield its secrets... After being and appearance had parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of a beholder (as it had done in the *vita contemplativa*), there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances... Certainty of knowledge could be reached only under a twofold condition: first, that knowledge concerned only what one had done himself – so that its ideal became mathematical knowledge, where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind – and second, that knowledge was of such a nature that it could be tested only through more doing. (290, my parenthesis)<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> The problem it eventually provided for the sciences themselves was not apparent until the twentieth century, a topic discussed in the second point, ‘The Universal Method,’ below.

<sup>80</sup> To recognise how compelling the motive was to reverse their hierarchical order and prioritise action to contemplation (while utterly transforming the latter), Arendt suggests we must first ‘rid ourselves of the current prejudice which ascribes the development of modern science, because of its applicability, to a pragmatic desire to improve conditions and better human life on earth... (its origins lie) exclusively in an altogether non-practical search for useless knowledge... if we had to rely only on men’s so-called practical instincts, there would never have been any technology to speak of.’ (289)

This shift to an emphasis upon *doing* however did not simply reverse the estimate of the merit of the two activities, it also redefined what they were. The effect that the *cogito* had on redefining the activity of contemplation is clarified in this excerpt. It altered the conduct of the philosopher from the act of contemplation, where truth was regarded by the mental eye of the beholder, to the act of introspection, where only the thoughts themselves are regarded.

However to explain precisely how the model of internal process also had an effect on all human *activities* as a side-effect of the project of the *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam*, it is first necessary to understand what various types of human activities there are and to note how they can be distinguished. Arendt suggests, using a Classical model, that there are *three activities* typical of mankind. Corresponding to these three types of activity are *three conditions* in which the activities take place, conditions increasing in their order of artificiality and in their requirement to have other observers. Consequently, they are also less and less compatible with an introspective process that eschews reference to the world and others.

### *The three activities of mankind*

The first activity of man is that of *labour*, which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, of man as an animal on the *earth*. Associated with labour and the activity of mankind as an *animal laborans* are the necessities of life. It is thus not accidental that the word labour is also associated with child-birth as both were regarded as necessary, biological, painful and, perhaps most significantly for a political understanding, private.<sup>81</sup> 'The human condition of labour is life itself.' The second activity of man, corresponding to the 'unnaturalness of human existence,' that of the *homo faber*, is that of *work*. Work creates an artificial *world* of objects that are meant to outlast their makers. This very quality thereby accommodates the earth to mankind. 'The human condition of work is worldliness.' The third activity of man is that of *action*, 'the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, (which) corresponds to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.'<sup>82</sup> The 'place' where this activity took place was

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<sup>81</sup> The Classical sense of deprivation in privacy has only really been retained in the sense of the word privation in the English language, and there it is now associated with the necessities of life. For her discussion of the word labour and its modern redefinition that excludes this sense of deprivation, see *THC*, 47-48.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* 7. The plurality that characterises this activity is fundamental to all political life precisely because of the peculiar *generic* quality of human *individuality*. 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.' (8) Arendt points out it this plurality was the very reason why 'to live' and 'to be among men' (*inter homines esse*) and 'to die' and 'to cease to be among men' (*inter homines esse desinere*) were synonymous for the Romans. Similarly, she points out, the

known as the public sphere and the life that was led there was known as the *bios politikos* or *vita activa* by the Greeks and Romans respectively.<sup>83</sup> This place was the most artificial and tenuous of all precisely because it could only exist once the need to serve biological necessity had been relieved and a world had been constructed where such a public and political life of appearing and acting in conjunction with one's equals could take place. What was most significant about it for our purposes is that the activities that took place in it could not be foreseen or predicted; they were events with inherent potential to bring about radical changes, not the 'results of processes.'

The internal processes of the *cogito*, which Arendt depicts as Descartes' relocation of Galileo's universal Archimedian point to a place within the mind, had a different effect on all three areas. On the one hand, the model of introspection led to the 'unnatural growth of the natural' *processes of labour* (first through the organisation and division of labour and later by its replacement with automatic machines).<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Arendt explains that it worked to undermine *work* and *action* because, in the act of *doubting appearances* on a universal scale, it failed to allow for the *revelatory*, event-like and public character of their forms of activity or for their intention to achieve *permanence*. The dependence of events or actions on either achieving quasi-permanent visibility or on being *seen by others* meant that they were *distinctive* and could never be repeated exactly. Nor could they be understood as an 'internal process' like that of the *cogito*. The modern mind informed by the process of introspection and its universal prejudice thus either rejected these activities as outdated 'traditions' or attacked them as prejudices – since no events of any *meaning* could be verified by experiment.<sup>85</sup>

At this point, it might be worth noting how Arendt differs from Gadamer in her interpretation of this problem. We should recall the similarities first: Gadamer argued that Kant and the Enlightenment had (mistakenly) employed a 'prejudice against prejudice' in understanding the world, speech and action according to premises that doubted all forms of appearance universally. This had operated against traditional claims to truth because it

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human condition of action was implicit in the creation account of Genesis 1:27 'Male and female created He *them*.'

<sup>83</sup> Indeed the polis was constructed for the very purpose of enabling the activities of the public sphere.

<sup>84</sup> 'Descartes believed that the certainty yielded by his new method of introspection is the certainty of the I-am. Man, in other words, carries his certainty, the certainty of his existence, within himself; the sheer functioning of consciousness, though it cannot possibly assure a worldly reality given to the senses and to reason, confirms beyond doubt the reality of sensations and of reasoning, that is, the reality of processes which go on in the mind. These are not unlike the biological processes that go on in the body and which, when one becomes aware of them, can also convince one of its working reality.'

(280)

<sup>85</sup> This is the basis of the divide between truth and meaning in modern thinking.

exposed their lack of 'universality.' He also attributed Kant's replacement of the *sensus communis* by an altogether different 'healthy common sense' to the same rationale.<sup>86</sup> Finally, he argued, quite against the sensibilities inculcated in contemporary thinking by the Enlightenment, not only that truth-claims could still be made but that they were unavoidable, as prejudice was an inalienable part of the 'anticipatory' thinking of conditioned and historical beings.

Arendt's account effectively records the same process of world alienation as Gadamer's does, but it is far more insightful than his because it seeks the *significance* of the original *sensus communis* rather than simply recording that it was a necessary form of prejudice. By understanding its rationale and the unique qualities it possessed, she can elaborate upon the implications of its loss. She argues that the *sensus communis* entailed more than what Gadamer had correctly noted about it, that it was the means by which the intimately *private* sensations of the five senses were fitted into the *common* world through language. What was particularly significant about this sense of the community was that it bore witness to the results of the *unique* words and actions that had taken place within the context of the *public sphere*. This should not be misunderstood though. The *sensus communis* was not just the sense agreed upon any given community (as modern reader-response critics have argued in agreement with Gadamer's resuscitation of the necessity of communal prejudices). That is merely a *universal perspective on community* that leads to pure relativism. Rather, it was the sense of a particular type of community, that of the Greek *polis* or the Roman *res publica*. This type of community is not intrinsically superior to others (or if it is, that is not the point being made), but it demonstrates better than others the particular character of humanity to act in common and creates a place where individuality can be revealed. The human condition of plurality is the condition that allows man's uniqueness as an individual agent to manifest itself – it can be noted and hopefully, immortalised by others. It allows it to escape the ubiquitous account in contemporary thinking reducing human action to the determinations of biology, and thereby to equate it with behaviour.

It can *demonstrate* this precisely because the conditions under which the Greek 'politician' or Roman citizen acted ensured that he was free from the charge of being motivated by the irrepressible burden of human needs. Because of the Ancients' requirement that one be free from serving or pursuing the necessities of life in order to be a citizen (one

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<sup>86</sup> Both Gadamer and Arendt note the transformation of common sense into an inner sense in the difference between the older German word *Gemeinsinn* and the more recent expression *gesunder Menschenverstand*.

could not be a labourer or an artisan or a trader), a sense of the relation between the free *interaction* of the individual with his community of equals is revealed. The (inter)-actions of such citizens cannot be attributed to the compulsion of necessary processes, as they do not pursue them. This differentiates them from modern social studies. It means that they display in all prominence the 'condition' of humanity that cannot be reduced or even related to biological necessity: action, with which words were inextricably linked. This was also displayed in the very purpose of the polis or the republic, which was to debate or contest over policy and then act in conjunction with others in carrying it through. This freedom of action, manifested and even enacted in language, enables mankind to *initiate consequences* and also to *understand* them. Understanding remains inalienable from the power of language, but it is only in the context of such a community that the relation of language to action becomes clear.

The consequences of this demonstration are significant. The *sensus communis* established by free individuals speaking and acting in the public sphere before a community of equals guarantees a communal ethics that acknowledges the freedom of the individual (and of the community) to act. Along with that, it also accounts responsibility for those free acts. Without a common sense that entails the freedom of action, which the system of common law in some sense still embodies (in defiance of the spirit of modern introspection), there can be no such thing as ethical conduct for example. One problem that emerges in understanding human activity only as processes then (or stemming from them) is that it implicitly denies the individual the freedom to act. The accompanying side of that problem is that responsibility, justice and judgement are thus always deferred to the outcome of processes that are ineluctable but also inconclusive. This is what has been called the hermeneutic or vicious circle. The tendency that such a model of human activity inculcates is to disregard the freedom and responsibility inherent in thinking and in acting on both an individual and a corporate level. Responsibility can be indefinitely deferred to the inescapable formation of processes. This is precisely the threat posed by the new concept of life that emerges in the Romantic period and is enshrined in contemporary universal hermeneutics – it relates human being fundamentally to the order of an inexpressible sense, the empathetic power of 'feeling' that the Romantic poet seeks to mediate to others. I will elaborate upon this in greater detail in the next chapter.

The terrible consequences of the *cogito*'s emphasis on process can be seen in the effect it had, even in mathematics, its first conquest, on the way human understanding was formulated:

The mind of this man – to remain in the sphere of mathematics – no longer looks upon 'two-and-two-are-four' as an equation in which two sides balance in a self-

evident harmony, but understands the equation as the expression of a process in which two and two *become* four in order to generate further processes of addition which will eventually lead into the infinite. This faculty the modern age calls common-sense reasoning; it is the playing of the mind with itself, which comes to pass when the mind is shut off from all reality and 'senses' only itself. The results of this play are compelling 'truths' because the structure of one man's mind is supposed to differ no more from that of another than the shape of his body. Whatever difference there is may be is a difference of mental power, which can be tested and measured like horsepower. Here the old definition of man as an *animal rationale* acquires a terrible precision: deprived of the sense through which man's five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men, human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, 'to reckon with consequences.' (283-84)

### *The onset of society and the public concern with life*

However, Cartesian science would never have been able to gain credibility in the human sphere or application to it simply on the strength of its ability to perceive the reality of the natural world as a network of processes or its ability to come up with technical inventions that exploited those processes. The human world, at least initially, obviously worked differently. The world created by architects and by artisans was obviously meant to accommodate man to the earth beyond the span of one generation; indeed in the case of public buildings, these accommodations of mankind to the earth were to be monuments that transcended the ravages of time, not to change in conjunction with nature.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, men of action strove not just for the maintenance of life but for immortality in the annals of historians or the tales of poets.<sup>88</sup>

In order for introspection to gain hold in the human sphere to the point where its validity could be regarded as self-evident it required that these activities became less and less characteristic and that this world became less and less 'permanent' in order that its biological pattern of process could become more and more plausible as a general account of human activity. Christianity was indirectly responsible for this by valorising the eternal at the expense of the immortal in its contempt for worldly fame. But the entirely selfless and gratuitous nature of Christian charity hardly poses less of a problem than action does for an attempt to understand activity as a series of necessary processes. There is little necessary in the character of self-sacrifice. Instead, something totally different than such an act needed to take place. Human activity would need to be normalised and attuned to the processes of life for the modern understanding of humanity as animals who reason to become credible.

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<sup>87</sup> Arendt accounts the decline in the construction of public buildings to the change in the estimation of what human activity is, i.e. its orientation towards the processes of life.



Arendt argues that this is precisely what came about with the emergence of modern society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as society marks nothing other than 'the public organisation of the life process itself.'<sup>89</sup> The condition of uniformity that was instilled by the public institutions that society had created to suppress the 'traditional' or individualistic actions which did not serve its household needs made society compatible to the mode of the *cogito*'s terms of understanding, the terms of a process towards the infinite. In many respects the emergence of society thus indicated the inversion, in form and content, of the public and private spheres: 'Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.'<sup>46</sup> Ultimately however, this inversion came at the expense of both the private domain of the family and the political domain of action:

The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves.<sup>47</sup>

The successes of hegemonic social institutions in instilling human conformity (and thus bolstering the claim for the universal validity of the model of process in the human sphere) are manifest in the very fact that by the nineteenth century humanity had been normalised enough for scientists to think that human activity could be examined just as it could in the case of animals, in terms of behaviour. It was this belief that human activity could be analysed, quantified and predicted that in turn created the social sciences. The project of the behaviourist sciences, which operated on the assumption instilled by conformity that men *behave* and do not *act* towards one another, is inconceivable prior to the onset of society and its normative powers.

If as a result of the onset of society human behaviour became more attuned to the productivity of labour and thus more 'natural' i.e. biological, this did not mean that it became more egalitarian; or if it was, then it was so not in the sense that individuality was preserved, but rather extinguished:

The striking coincidence of the rise of society with the decline of the family indicates clearly that what actually took place was the absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups. The equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head, except that in

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<sup>88</sup> This was precisely because the Classical understanding of history was cyclical. Only by achieving immortality through words and deeds could that cycle be escaped.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Chapters 4-6 of THC.

society, where the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer number, actual rule exerted by one man, representing the common interest and the right opinion, could eventually be dispensed with. The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of this modern development.(40)

Arendt would argue that the life of man also became less human, not in its very nature, which still possesses the capacity for words and for action in concert, but in its conduct towards itself and the world. The paradoxical beliefs that were instilled, on the one hand that 'everything is possible' and on the other that human beings are merely an animal species governed by laws of nature or history are the basis of totalitarianism:

Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society which, entirely submerged in the routine in everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence.(43)

It might be useful to draw back from this summary of Arendt's work just for an instant to make a remark about the onset of society and the development of modern hermeneutics. It can hardly be accidental that in Schleiermacher the general hermeneutic movement was introduced by a writer coming from the scattered fiefdoms and feudal principalities of what is now Germany, in other words from a place where no substantial political sphere per se was in evidence.<sup>90</sup> This is where hegemonic social institutions had been brought most thoroughly into force at least since the time of the benevolent despotism of the Emperor Joseph II (1765-90). The lack of a political culture in German society and the strong pressures of Enlightened conformity placed upon it made organicism a more plausible political model in the humanities there, where it would and did still encounter grave opposition elsewhere. It was perhaps only the onset of industrialisation and the power it delivered to the nations that adopted it which forced the conformity that took hold of German society to be adopted throughout Europe of the Enlightenment. This social pressure to conform acts as the rather confusing backdrop of the English Romantic movement, to which more attention will be devoted in the next chapters, in particular in relation to Wordsworth's exaltation of feeling. However it is worth noting that along with that development of patterns of process into the human sphere, the Cartesian moment of doubt and, ultimately, the *aporia* of unintelligibility, was brought into the very heart of hermeneutics.

What Arendt's account does next, having demonstrated that historically speaking such an alogical understanding of the human condition is absurd, is to demonstrate how

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<sup>90</sup> Gadamer and a whole litany of other writers have referred to the lack of a real political culture in Germany, or its attendant *sensus communis*, and cited that lack as the primary reason why Kant first

Cartesian introspection has now brought universal relativity not only into the human sciences, but, since Einstein, also into the 'natural sciences.'<sup>91</sup> This once again sheds an entirely different light on the hermeneutic discussion.

## ii) *The Universal Method*

Cartesian introspection initially led the modern mind to the conclusion that even if one cannot know truth as it is given and disclosed (as the philosophical act of contemplation had understood), man can at least know what he himself made. The experiments that followed were part of an exercise in 'saving the appearances', which happened through its *method* of securing certainty against universal doubt. The conviction of certainty provided by the demonstration of instruments and experiments characterised modern science up until the early twentieth century. It was the basis of the natural sciences' claim of certainty that Dilthey had accepted axiomatically when he wrote and it was the certainty that he strove to emulate in the *Geisteswissenschaften* in understanding meaning in terms of truth.

However this belief in the certainty and in the truth provided by universal science became infinitely problematic when Einstein's theory of relativity actually permitted the *real* conversion of mass into energy and vice versa, and when mankind actually developed the capability to depart from the confines of the earth's environment.<sup>92</sup> The 'victories' in these instances were rather pyrrhic. For these astonishing and very real mathematisations of physics did not just result in yet another advance toward the infinite, as previous experiments had. They had the implication that mankind could apply virtually any principle and *create* a sort of virtual reality, but still without providing any real sense of what reality is. This created the contemporary scenario, which is almost a nightmare, that through applied introspection mankind can bring the powers of the universe to bear on the world, but without any real awareness of the *meaning* of what it is doing. Its access to this 'virtual world' is wholly

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misunderstood taste as merely a lower form of judgement and then reworked it according to the 'prejudice against prejudice' into his 'Cartesian' *gesunder Menschenverstand*.

<sup>91</sup> Arendt argues that our continued use of the term natural sciences is somewhat misleading as a description of contemporary science:

If one wishes to draw a distinctive line between the modern age and the world we have come to live in, he may well find it in the difference between a science which looks upon nature from a universal standpoint and thus acquires complete mastery over her, on the one hand, and a truly 'universal' science, on the other, which imports cosmic processes into nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her and, with her, man's mastery over her. (268)

<sup>92</sup> The particular event with which the 1958 Prologue of *The Human Condition* began was the first launch of a satellite into the earth's orbit in 1957. That event provoked the revealing response from its scientists that mankind had made a first 'step toward escape from the earth's imprisonment.' Arendt

artificial, mediated (and interpreted) by instruments of man's own making. In other words, the demonstration of the applicability of the theory of universal relativity meant that experiments *could no longer attain demonstrable validity*, because the world of appearances (in which validity had been demonstrated in the past) had now *itself* been made utterly relative:

At this point, the connection between thought and sense experience, inherent in the human condition, seems to take its revenge: while technology demonstrates the 'truth' of modern science's most abstract concepts, it demonstrates no more than that man can always apply the results of his mind, that no matter which system he uses for the explanation of natural phenomena he will always be able to adopt it as a guiding principle for making and acting... If... present-day science in its perplexity points to technical achievements to 'prove' that we deal with an 'authentic order' given in nature, it seems it has fallen into a vicious circle, which can be formulated as follows: scientists formulate their hypotheses to arrange their experiments and then use these experiments to verify their hypotheses; during this whole enterprise, they obviously deal with a hypothetical nature. (287)

Arendt's account therefore depicts a development in contemporary science that has made the general hermeneutic problem as understood by Ricoeur et al. far more complicated than his attempts, based on Heidegger's primordial ontology, to find the residual traces of being through symbolic language will allow. It depicts how the divide between explanation and understanding of the human sciences, the problematic *aporia* that plagued the venture of general hermeneutics, has now extended to engulf the natural sciences as well. The poets trumpeting organicism were indeed the unacknowledged legislators of the universe.

The *aporia* for understanding that Ricoeur depicted, which is a result of nothing but the adoption of the universal world-view into textual interpretation, was pursued as a goal as long as it had served to further the scientific metanarrative of progress towards the infinite. The pursuit of its progress towards 'truth' was tolerated right up until the twentieth century even though the consequences of devices that had come about through abstract reasoning had extraordinary and not always beneficial effects on humanity, effects which could only be comprehended in the ethical and political terms of human community, which are those of language, *after* they have already become apparent in the world. The effect on human activities and on human thinking has already been noted. But now science has consequences that cannot be grasped even after the fact because it harnesses powers of the universe that are alien to the earth and remain alien to it:

The trouble (now) concerns the fact that the 'truths' of the modern scientific world view, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and

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claimed that both the event itself and the sentiments of the scientists were unprecedented – and only failed to achieve recognition as such because they were already the banal stuff of science fiction.

thought. The moment these 'truths' are spoken of conceptually and coherently, the resulting statements will be 'not perhaps as meaningless as a 'triangular circle,' but much more so than a 'winged lion.'" (Erwin Schrödinger) (3)

It is not only the recent development of science's own inability to conceptualise 'truths' of its own making that concerns her account however. In addition to the way in which the implements of scientific advances always precede the comprehension of their consequences, Arendt also wishes to explain how this *aporia* has been turned inwardly, as an 'Archimedean point against ourselves.' The use of such a point of power explains the common metaphors of contemporary science:

The reason why scientists can tell us about the 'life' in the atom – where apparently every particle is 'free' to behave as it wants and the laws ruling these movements are the same statistical laws which, according to the social scientists, rule human behaviour and make the multitude behave as it must, no matter how 'free' the individual particle may appear to be in its choices – in other words, why the behaviour of the infinitely small particle is not only similar in pattern to the planetary system as it appears to us but resembles the life and behaviour patterns in human society is, of course, that we look and live in this society as though we were as far removed from our own human existence as we are from the infinitely small and the immensely large which, even if they could be perceived by the finest instruments, are too far away to be experienced. (323)

This universal alienation of humanity from its own existence is a movement that may owe itself to the application of what Gadamer had called the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice.' Language itself, Arendt suggests, has been alienated as an essential characteristic of human being because being human has lost its communal and political sense. The communal, active and verbal characteristics of mankind were, she argues, central to understandings of humanity in both strands of the Western tradition, the Classical and the Biblical.

### *Arendt, Heidegger and Gadamer*

The problem Arendt locates in current thinking then centres around the theme familiar since Heidegger of *alienation*, in particular of the alienation that has been encouraged by Descartes' 'inauthentic concept of being,' the form of the knowledge that its 'universal perspective' provides that is inadequate to the *specific* requirements of created beings. In short, it is inadequate because it presents knowledge to fundamentally speaking beings in an analytical, mathematical form that is alien to them as *creatures* of flesh and blood in symbiosis with the earth's other creatures and as *inhabitants* of a world of things. The anti-traditional Cartesian concept of being, Arendt argues, has led over the centuries to an alienation from the world – a gradual process of attuning human work to the processes of life, intensified through the process of automation an alienation from the *earth* and alienation from

the *world* – of which more shall be said in a moment – developments that offer striking demonstrations of human *transcendence* of them both but which also thereby entail ‘a rebellion against human existence as it has been given.’(2) But Arendt diverges sharply from the accounts of Heidegger and Gadamer in several ways:

The most important of these is that whereas Heidegger and Gadamer had placed – in contradistinction to the atemporality of Cartesian being – an emphasis on the anticipatory character of human *mortality* almost as if it were the only formative contingency upon human knowledge and human being (for, as Gadamer made clear, according to Heidegger being *is* time), Arendt places her emphasis on *natality*. This difference is absolutely crucial. While their emphasis on human mortality does reject universal claims for human knowledge by demonstrating that the Cartesian ‘prejudice against prejudice’ is inadequate and inappropriate for finite beings’ understanding (precisely because of its transcendental power), the exclusivity of their contrary emphasis on finitude gives them a curious tendency to regard the human condition as *static*, even if the character of this stasis is that of permanent *process*. ‘Dauer im Wechsel’ Goethe called it. That emphasis on the historicity of being thus had the consequence that human action was denied any truly formative power. It could in-form, but not form the human condition. It reflected the life processes themselves.

Arendt wishes to make distinctions here that they do not. She would certainly agree that human actions do not change the fundamental human condition, that of human nature. That is a central premise of her thesis. But Arendt does not follow her mentor Heidegger or her contemporary Gadamer’s impulses towards absolute statements against absolute statements. On the one hand she emphasises that the power of change is *intrinsic* in human nature. Her emphasis on natality affirms the primacy of creation and of human creativity. This is so vital because it reminds us of the characteristic that Arendt is at pains to demonstrate in her account of The Human Condition, extending from the understanding of humanity in the Greek polis and in Judaeo-Christian thought to the account of historical changes leading up to the present day: it reminds us that human beings are creatures who can and do *act*. Along with the power of action comes the genuine power to *initiate* subsequent events and create new things with consequences that cannot be foreseen.

On the other hand, she denies that that power for change is absolute. To absolutise temporality as a form of *truth* is to render changes (and actions) in time *meaningless*. Human being is certainly inalienably temporal, but it is not time (and since we are temporal, it seems meaningless to define what we are *not* as time either). This means that although the human power to act in unison (according to the basic human condition of plurality) is perennial, the

power does not extend so far as to change *human nature*.<sup>93</sup> Arendt makes it clear that the sum total of human activities and capabilities and conditions do not constitute anything like human nature:

The problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* ('a question have I become for myself'), seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense. It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows. Moreover, nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things. In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he would be able to speak about a 'who' as though it were a 'what.'(10)

She thus separates the fundamental perspective on human nature from the totalising, a distinction that they repeatedly fail to make. One illustration she makes presents this point about the incalculable consequences of actions lucidly (and pertinently to the issue of being and time). She reminds the reader that the invention of the clock had originally been intended for the abstract purpose of conducting certain experiments, of proving what introspective analysis had suggested as a hypothesis. It was only afterwards that its practical uses were realised.

Gadamer's sense of tradition, I believe Arendt would say, unwittingly reflects the individualism characteristic of the Cartesian prioritisation of the universal because it does not acknowledge the proper *dynamics* of language in relation to human agency. This is precisely her rationale for questioning scientists' own judgement about their work, that they 'move in a world where speech has lost its power,' a fact which discredits their political and ethical judgements. For she observes that:

... whatever men do or know or experience can make *sense* only to the extent that it can be spoken about. There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves. (4)

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<sup>93</sup> The emphasis on an unchanging human nature is crucial in Arendt's account, but it only occupies the outset of her account. For this reason, her thesis is somewhat confusing, as the introduction to the second edition suggests. This is because she places her emphasis on the unique, and now obsolete, conditions of the Greek polis rather than on a creation account such as that in Genesis, which she only briefly alludes to at the outset of her work. This is surprising since the accounts in Genesis also emphasise that Man was created in God's image and that he was a speaking God, with a relationship both to mankind and, looking forward to the further revelation in John's Gospel, to the other two persons of the Trinity. It also had a greater role in the development of the Western world's *sensus communis* than her account accords. Her failure to make explicit the importance of a correct understanding of human anthropology is addressed by Wolfhart Pannenberg in his Anthropology from a Theological Perspective. (1985).

### *Arendt as a political writer?*

The hermeneutic implications of Arendt's discussion of the human condition seem to have evaded scholarship. In fact, she has had little impact upon contemporary thought other than as a political writer concerned particularly with totalitarianism. And at one level this book could also be understood as a political study. As we saw, The Human Condition depicts the decline in Western civilisation of the public (and political) realm of *action*, which was defined in Ancient Greece and Rome as a place where a man who was free from serving life's necessities could *speak*, act and be heard by his peers. This gradual decline of politics has almost brought it to a state where it no longer can be comprehended for what it had meant by the onset of *society* and its tendency to publicise the processes of labouring.

If they were only taken in their entirely modern sense as issues of government or administration, these political considerations could mask the further, hermeneutic implications of the decline in the efficacy of the word that Arendt catalogues. But her account of the decline in the power of the spoken word along with the removal of the public sphere in which it had flourished is matched by the correspondent rise she traces in the power of science, which had brought about the 'unnatural growth of the natural' by expanding the power of labour, where language was eschewed in expressing analytical relations. The relation and implications of the two movements of decline and ascendance preoccupy her entire, fundamentally hermeneutic discussion of the problem of the *aporia* created by modern science. That problem is the decline of *meaning* in contemporary society, which is reflected in the orientation of both poetry and hermeneutics towards the *truth* of life and its processes and away from its *meaning*.

The fact that the hermeneutic implications of Arendt's account have thus far been ignored may be precisely because of the subtle manner in which she has blended what is apparently incompatible in her account: an insistence upon the *essential characteristics* of humanity, which we possess prior to any 'conditioning,' together with an insistence upon the fact that we are also fundamentally *conditioned beings* and thus are open to adapt ourselves to our circumstances, including the ones we create. In this marriage of opposites, Arendt announces that an understanding of humanity according to the terms of a nature versus nurture debate is hopelessly reductive. It misconstrues the simple fact that language (which she shows has always been definitive of humanity) always bears the marks of both influences. It is inalienable from a definition of human nature and yet it is also undeniably a conditioned attribute. It is natural and artificial; it is active and it reflects what it perceives. The combination of all these characteristics are what Pannenberg calls the peculiar way in which



mankind maintains its 'openness to the world,' its destiny (*Bestimmung*). Therefore she argues that to insist on the priority of one at the expense of the other (which is inherent in taking life as being and its 'truth' as meaning) is to misconstrue that relationship and to pervert the harmony of the whole, eventually at the expense of both.

It is her own insistence on a coincidence of opposites that allows her to bring novel arguments directly to bear on the discussion of hermeneutic issues that have been the subject of these past few chapters. The view of language that she carefully argues from the outset of her book emphasises that it is both a natural and an acquired capacity for humanity, an aspect of human agency developed from birth. That is the point at which she radically departs from Heidegger and Gadamer's account of 'being.' For as we have already noted, by relegating one of the types of language to be a secondary characteristic of 'being,' i.e. the language which refers to the empirical world,<sup>94</sup> Heidegger and Gadamer had effectively excluded language from primordial 'human being.' The human being they had proposed was based on silent listening – as if life *spoke* to humanity.<sup>95</sup> In the process of discussing the changes in the human condition, she therefore *implicitly* demonstrates that the source of the Heideggerian account of being was to be found in the central premises of modern science and not in a return to the questions of pre-Socratic philosophy that Heidegger had claimed.

That demonstration again has some subtlety to it. On the one hand, she seems to agree with Heidegger and Gadamer. She argues quite similarly that the current crisis in thinking displayed by the launch of the satellite, the convertibility of mass into energy and vice versa and subsequent marvels since then was a result of the pursuit of the 'universal world-view' of modern science. This is what Gadamer had called the Enlightenment's characteristic 'prejudice against prejudice.' On the other hand, she does not jump to Heidegger's conclusion that Descartes' *cogito* necessarily entailed an 'inauthentic representation of being.' Descartes' demonstration of the capacity of mankind for universal thinking – thoughts that could not be related in any respect to terrestrial life – in fact showed that mankind's destiny could not simply be reduced to or derived from the material world. In fact, Descartes had thereby demonstrated – as well as any sacred writing – that mankind's origin could not possibly lie in the created universe: his speculations were made in complete

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<sup>94</sup> 'From *Being and Time* onwards, *saying* (*reden*) appears superior to *speaking* (*sprechen*). 'Saying' designates the existential constitution, whereas 'speaking' indicates the mundane aspect that lapses into the empirical. Hence the first determination of *saying* is not *speaking*, but rather the couple *hearing/keeping silent*.'" (Ricoeur, *H&HS*, 58)

<sup>95</sup> It could be argued that neither Heidegger nor Gadamer are wont to use the term human being in their writing and thus that they are immune to this charge.

alienation from it.<sup>96</sup> His thoughts were always pushing beyond that borne by means of ever more powerful instruments, but always only locating a further absence. The capacity of mankind to harness forces beyond those of the terrestrial sphere demonstrated that mankind's power to think was akin, if entirely derivative, of the divine act of creation. This corresponds to the argument that Coleridge will make about the human imagination, related to a coherent sense of agency, in the *Biographia Literaria*. He described there the primary imagination as 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 infinite I AM.'

What had been inauthentic however, she argues, was how the *cogito* had been interpreted. Firstly, it had led science to the tendency to regard nature as something that needed to be escaped or utterly dominated. Secondly, and attending the first incorrect interpretation, it led to the tendency to think that the problem posed by Cartesian science could only be solved by an analogous course of method, i.e. by seeking certainty in a ground of supposed ontological priority, life itself. I shall turn to this development now.

### *Romanticism and the emergence of life as the greatest good*

However helpful Arendt's account of the human condition is for providing a more detailed and historical overview of the important subject of anthropology in contemporary thought, her decisive contribution to the discussion of hermeneutics consists in her study's recognition of the novelty of the idea that emerges in the nineteenth century, the idea of life as the greatest good. It is on that point that her discussion of the various activities of man – those corresponding to labour, work and the *vita activa* – sets itself apart from discussions of modernity that merely examine the development of ideas. For a narrative recounting the effects of universality and world-alienation only extend so far as an explanation of the contemporary intellectual landscape. What must be recognised, she emphasises, is that *human activity* has also undergone a radical reassessment in late modernity. The philosophical turning point for this development was probably located in David Hume's radical critique of the notion of causality. Hume's critique of Deism and the idea of God as a sort of divine watchmaker was vastly influential on posterity. We shall see evidence of its influence in all of the Romantics' (and post-Romantics') thinking about *creativity* and the

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<sup>96</sup> She argues furthermore that 'to demask such philosophic concepts of the divine as conceptualisations of human capabilities and qualities is not a demonstration of, not even an argument for, the non-existence of God; but the fact that attempts to define man lead so easily into an idea which definitely strikes us as 'superhuman' and therefore is identified with the divine may cast suspicion upon the very concept of 'human nature.' (11)

artist's role and purpose in writing poetry in the last three chapters of the thesis. This debunking of the notion of causality also functions as an explanation for the emergence of modern hermeneutics. For the change in the model of creative activity necessarily had an effect upon how creativity was to be interpreted. The change, it seems to me, is the source of the incorporation of what has since been designated as the hermeneutic *aporia* into contemporary thinking.

The change took place because of the association of a certain *type* of activity with causality and thus entails its rejection as a model along with it. Far more important than the oft-cited shift from a principle of mimesis to one of expression in the Romantic period is the shift we can observe in the model of action taken for the artist. The two axiomatic principles of causality – 'that every thing must have a cause (*nihil sine causa*) and that the cause must be more perfect than its most perfect effect' (312) had provided poets in the past with the model of the artist as a maker (*homo faber*). In that model, the maker was obviously superior to his product. He had an idea of what he wished to create, he formed it according to his purposes and he brought it into being by bringing it into the world of appearances. This concept of the artist as a (second) maker predominated the notions of Western creativity up until the late eighteenth century. The key change to that concept took place when an organic notion of life replaced notions in which causality was emphasised.<sup>97</sup> For that change paved the way for the idea that a *lower* form of being, such as an ape, could evolve and cause the appearance of a higher being, such as man. The mechanistic notion of creation represented in the Enlightenment by the image of the divine watchmaker was replaced by a more organic notion that eschewed the inference of causality and the idea of formal agency in the creative processes. The change informed the characteristic perception of organic progress in human history in the time following the French Revolution in thinkers in the Hegelian mould (and it is certainly not alien to Shelley's account of the organic progress of the 'human spirit' through poetry in his Defence of Poetry).

Arendt observes that this change was decisive in another significant respect, which almost made the twofold consequences of Galileo's discovery, the method of experiment and making on the one hand and the method of introspection on the other, seem to have been utterly incompatible:

For the only tangible object introspection yields, if it is to yield more than an entirely empty consciousness of itself, is indeed the biological process. And since this

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<sup>97</sup> The model of the artist as a maker, modelling himself after the Divine Maker, was a model of explicit comparison in Shelley's Mont Blanc and Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn, against which a model in which the artist mediated the life-processes was presented. I address these presentations in chapters four and five below.

biological life, accessible in self-observation, is at the same time a metabolic process between man and nature, it is as though introspection no longer needs to get lost in the ramifications of a consciousness without reality, but has found within man – not in his mind but in his bodily processes – enough outside matter to connect him again with the outer world. The split between subject and object, inherent in human consciousness and irremediable in the Cartesian opposition of man as a *res cogitans* to a surrounding world of *res extensae*, disappears altogether in the case of a living organism, whose very survival depends upon the incorporation, the consumption, of outside matter. (312-13)

This connection of man to nature in a form of organic unity took place most obviously in English Romantic poetry in Wordsworth's emphasis upon feeling, the sense of connection between man and the rest of the universe. But organicist notions emphasising this sort of unity of 'one life within us and abroad' are no less current in the thought of Coleridge, Shelley or Keats, whatever their individual differences might be.

However, Arendt's awareness of the role of organicist notions in both perpetuating and apparently solving the fundamental split of Cartesian dualism is not restricted to noting the progress of intellectual history. The change that took place in the evaluation of labour and its rise to a status of pre-eminence is not explicable on such terms alone:

The defeat of *homo faber* may be explainable in terms of the initial transformation of physics into astrophysics, of natural sciences into a 'universal science.' What still remains to be explained is why this defeat ended with a victory of the *animal laborans*; why, with the rise of the *vita activa*, it was precisely the labouring activity that was to be elevated to the highest rank of man's capacities or, to put it another way, why within the diversity of the human condition with its various human capacities it was precisely life that overruled all other considerations. (313)

Arendt suggests that the reversal was possible because it operated within the framework of Christian thinking, whose belief in the sanctity of human life survived the general decline in belief in the faith as a whole. It is interesting to note the irony of the change. It was precisely this aspect of the Christian faith that had broken with the ancient world and its political notions and proved ultimately disastrous for them, for it offered immortality in the life to come rather than in the world:

Political activity, which up to then had derived its greatest inspiration from the aspiration toward worldly immortality, now sank to the low level of an activity subject to necessity, destined to remedy the consequences of human sinfulness on one hand and to cater to the legitimate wants and interests of human life on the other. Aspiration toward immortality could now only be equated with vainglory; such fame as the world could bestow upon man was an illusion, since the world was even more perishable than man, and a striving for worldly immortality was meaningless, since life itself was immortal. (314)

However scrupulous and self-conscious the thinkers of modernity had been in attempting to eradicate the prejudices of Christianity and tradition in the name of human reason, the priority of life over everything else retained for them, as Arendt notes, the status

of a 'self-evident truth.' But it did so in a manner of emphasis that is characteristically modern, for the sense of the *meaning* of this self-evident truth of life was lost. One example of this is sufficient to demonstrate the change. In all of the Utilitarian arguments that emerged in the nineteenth century (often confused with hedonism) based on Bentham's 'pain and pleasure calculus,' it is worthy of note that there was no attempt to present a radical justification of suicide. Suicide however was essential however to Classical hedonism and its characteristic understanding of the *goal* of life to be in avoiding pain. But if the new significance of life was not, strictly speaking, hedonistic, the new priority of life did not retain its Christian emphasis either. For what mattered in the current form was not the immortality of life or living it in the knowledge that there would be a last judgement on actions in this world, making all actions *meaningful*, but rather taking life as the greatest good in 'the pursuit of happiness.' This development, so strongly associated with the late Enlightenment in its famous formulation in the American Declaration of Independence – the 'inalienable rights' of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' for its citizens – may be due to the decline in the estimation of the *vita contemplativa* that has come about with the onset of Cartesian doubt, for the life of contemplation had been affixed by Christianity to reflection upon the character of revealed divine perfection:

Only when the *vita activa* had lost its point of reference in the *vita contemplativa* could it become active life in the full sense of the word; and only because this active life remained bound to life as its only point of reference could life as such, the labouring metabolism of man with nature, become active and unfold its entire fertility. (320)

Arendt attributes this loss of belief in the benefits of the contemplation of divine perfection as presented in Biblical revelation more to the influence of prominent *religious writers* such as Pascal and Kierkegaard than to explicitly antagonistic doctrines.<sup>98</sup>

Only once life had been deprived of its *certainty* of immortality by the incorporation of Cartesian doubt into the life of faith by the influence of such thinkers, could something like the contemporary state of thinking arise, the redefinition and re-evaluation of life that forms the backdrop of Romanticism and the modern hermeneutic movement:

Individual life again became mortal, as mortal as it had been in antiquity, and the world was even less stable, less permanent, and hence less to be relied upon than it had been during the Christian era. Modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world; far from believing that the world might be potentially immortal (as in antiquity), he was not even sure that it was real. And in so far as he was to assume that it was real in the uncritical

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<sup>98</sup> 'For what undermined the Christian faith was not the atheism of the eighteenth century or the materialism of the nineteenth – their arguments are frequently vulgar and, for the most part, easily refutable by traditional theology – but rather the doubting concern with salvation of genuinely religious men, in whose eyes the traditional Christian content and promise had become 'absurd.'" (319)

and apparently unbothered optimism of a steadily progressing science, he had removed himself from the earth to a much more distant point than any Christian otherworldliness had ever removed him. Whatever the word 'secular' is meant to signify in its current usage, historically it cannot possibly be equated with worldliness; modern man at any rate did not gain the world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself. The only contents left were appetites and desires, the senseless urges of his body which he mistook for passion and which he deemed to be 'unreasonable' because he found he could not 'reason,' that is, not reckon with them. The only thing that could now be potentially immortal... was life itself, that is, the possibly everlasting life process of the species mankind. (320-21)

It is precisely this sort of rationale that could lead to a reassessment of poetry as something completely unrecognisable from its previous estimation as an artistic representation of reality or the creation of a work of art in emulation of the divine maker: the 'natural' mediation of life itself by the introspective acts of the poet.

What poetry became from the Romantic period onwards was something commensurate with a new definition of life, reinforced by the tendency of society to instil one interest in its members, as a 'natural force.'<sup>99</sup> Poetry, being strictly speaking unnecessary for life's metabolism with nature, attained nonetheless a new status and function in the Romantic period as it was perceived that it could symbolise and *vitalise* the unity of man with nature, a unity that remained under threat by the alienating forces of technology. It could do so because the poet took on the character of a prophet of life, expressing the spirit of the age. I shall look at some of the definitions of the poet and his activity in next three chapters.

### *Concluding remarks*

The emergence of life as the highest good entailed far more than a mere change in the model for the artist in the Romantic mould. It also became the source of modern life philosophy, whose greatest representatives are among the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century – Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson and Heidegger – philosophers who 'rebel against philosophy' and equate Life with Being. To make this equation, they rely no less on introspection than their modern predecessors, for 'life is indeed the only 'being' man can

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<sup>99</sup> 'Socialised mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared. What was left was a 'natural force,' the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted... and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was the survival of the animal species man.' (321)

possibly be aware of by looking merely into himself.' The difference between these philosophers and their predecessors in the modern age is that 'life appears to be more active and more productive than consciousness, which seems to be still too closely related to contemplation and the old ideal of truth.'

These philosophers of life share the appearance of emphasising action over and against contemplation. This is a characteristic they pass on to Kierkegaard and the existentialist philosophers following him such as Heidegger. But, Arendt argues, this appearance emphasising action is deceptive:

Upon closer inspection... none of these philosophers is actually concerned with action as such. We may leave aside here Kierkegaard and his non-worldly, inward-directed acting. Nietzsche and Bergson describe action in terms of fabrication – *homo faber* instead of *homo sapiens* – just as Marx thinks of acting in terms of making and describes labour in terms of work. But their ultimate point of reference is not work and worldliness any more than action; it is life and life's fertility. (313)

In its unwillingness to generalise its observations to the status of universal truths, Arendt's account is less satisfying than Heidegger's. It offers seemingly atavistic observations as a means of understanding a contemporary dilemma. Nonetheless, the account has the ring of authenticity about it that Heidegger's had lacked. One of the reasons for this is that Arendt's account is not so premised on either a triumphalist or a cynical account of the present state of the human condition that it cannot locate merit and failure in it without invoking a predetermined bias. This is the greatest strength of this study. If Gadamer has reminded the academic community that 'universal objectivity' is impossible because of the necessity of prejudice, Arendt's account has the greater merit of distinguishing prejudices from one another (rather than resuscitating the *indiscriminate* and generic form of 'prejudice' of life in language that Gadamer had). This strangely gives it an air of objectivity that neither Heidegger nor Gadamer have, who both associate life itself so strongly with prejudice (as a bulwark against universality) that the discriminations within their framework seem inconsequential.

Just as it seemed impossible to Arendt for man himself to answer the anthropological question, so it seems impossible to solve the hermeneutic *aporia* of incomprehensibility by an appeal to life itself. Life cannot be an answer to the question of being or provide a notion of truth. Nor can it lead to a critical method. Ricoeur's remark of the possibility of a critical moment in Gadamer's philosophy, suggested by the *distance* inherent in our consciousness of effective history, in the recognition of *otherness* inherent in the idea of the fusion of horizons and in his *philosophy of language*, which recognises the 'dialogue that we are' by being within a certain tradition seems to be altogether dissatisfactory if life is taken as a true

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prejudice. There can be no true sense of critical distance taken on life, if the language of life is the prejudice and it is employed by a living being. The relative distance to all of these things suggest nothing to me that would satisfy as a philosophical notion of truth.

Arendt's account seems to me to point to a way forward upon the front of hermeneutics precisely because she steps outside the model of thinking of the 'general hermeneutic' period. She does not accept uncritically the idea of life as being or life as a prejudice of the sort that can give rise to the notion of truth. Such notions belong to different frames of reference – those of the Classical world for instance, or those of revealed religion. The definition of man as an animal who reasons, who reckons with consequences, or as one who 'interprets himself' she questions as the ideology of socialised man. It is not an innocuous definition leading to the *aporia*, as she knew – it was the basis of totalitarianism, a nihilistic process motivated by paradoxical convictions: 'on the one hand the belief that 'everything is possible' and on the other that human beings are merely an animal species governed by laws of nature or history, in the service of which individuals are entirely dispensable.' (*Introduction, xi*)



### **Chapter 3. Wordsworth's understanding of nature in the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' (1802) and the hermeneutic significance of feeling**

William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802), the second version of his introduction to the surprisingly popular compilation of poems that he and Coleridge penned together, is justly famous as a sort of manifesto for the English Romantic movement as a whole.<sup>100</sup> Despite its widely acclaimed status as such, at least since the time of A. O. Lovejoy's assertion that one would do better to speak of 'Romanticisms' when characterising even the major writers of the period – illustrating very nicely the effect of what a recent critic has called the sublime 'aesthetic of individuation'<sup>101</sup> – the inadequacy of using only one explanatory model to characterise Romantic poetry has been recognised by critics. This originally helpful observation of high degrees of individuality among the Romantics has been elevated to the unfortunate status of being the *characteristic* principle of the movement in recent years though by the inclusion of a great many of the peripheral writers of the period to the canonical six. The central difficulty that these inclusions have caused is in linking writers together who appear to be so incongruous that it makes their collective definition as 'Romantics' virtually meaningless. This sheer incongruity has led to the somewhat lazy association of the writers to the time-period itself or to the sheer individuality of their expression. This seems to me to have occurred according to an organicist rationale, i.e. their 'representativeness of various walks of 'life.'" It is not my intention to try and remedy that by providing a new (or even an old) definition of Romanticism. What I simply wish to observe at the outset is that many of the contemporary studies I have read have largely abandoned the question of whether what was written is *meaningful* and, if it is (or is not), under what terms it can be said to be so. The types of questions philosophical enquiry has eagerly pursued in enlightened ages and the types of answers religions have always claimed to provide in the same have both ceded to studies informed by a combination of complacent pragmatism and lukewarm cynicism. These may be symptoms of what has been called the postmodern malaise in critical studies.

This chapter presents the gulf that opens up between the two prime architects of the Romantic movement in England on matters that concern precisely such issues. I hope to approach the topic and the issues in it hermeneutically. It seems important to recognise that

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<sup>100</sup> Similar status could be attributed to Coleridge's Biographia Literaria (1817) or Shelley's Defense of Poetry (1821) for that matter. All three, it is said, have quite similar views on the place of the poet and the importance of the imagination.

<sup>101</sup> Frances Ferguson. Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetic of Individuation. (1992)

this is not simply an abstract theoretical stance or a random attempt at a new reading suggested by current interests. The point on which all the Romantic poets seem to diverge in their emphases appears as a deeper hermeneutic issue with explicit *theological* implications very early on, among the central architects of this initial 'poetic experiment' in England themselves. In fact, the aim Wordsworth expressed at his Preface's very outset to present a 'selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,' while enormously influential on his peers, never met with much satisfaction with its sterner critics, among whom Coleridge was the most acute and persistent. So misconceived was the hermeneutic claim of the Preface in fact that his collaborator in the initial project felt the need fifteen years later, in his own great critical work, Biographia Literaria (1817), to address the claims Wordsworth had made on their mutual behalf and to distance himself from them. It is one of the secondary claims of my discussion then that Coleridge's Biographia has not been fully recognised for repeatedly raising the hermeneutic issues it does with Wordsworth's Preface. In particular, it has not been recognised that its attack on Wordsworth's theory was informed by his attempt to understand the issues as a Christian and as a writer allying himself with his literary and cultural tradition against Wordsworth's tone of hermeneutic rebellion against both.

The substantiation of that claim will have to wait for a more detailed exposition of what Wordsworth wrote in the Preface, but I might as well confess the prejudice I adhere to straight away. I have attempted in this chapter to present a 'Coleridgean reading' of Wordsworth by making explicit reference to the Christian theological underpinning of the arguments in the Biographia. This is often neglected in critiques of the work, which tend to read Coleridge as a Kantian or as *fully* sympathetic with the German philosophical tradition. This may in part owe itself to the historical accident that Coleridge acted as probably its prime mediator to the English-speaking world. The contemporary philosophical scene in Germany was doubtless enormously influential upon Coleridge too. The 'illustrious sage of Königsberg' – as Coleridge called Kant – offered him a framework and a stringent logic with which to explain the power of the human mind to think in universal terms, and even after fifteen years of acquaintance with his work he still read him 'with undiminished delight and increasing admiration.'<sup>102</sup>

This should not however lead us to misunderstand the tenor of Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth in the Biographia, nor his representation of theoretical issues against the tenor of

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<sup>102</sup> Biographia. IX, 84. (All page references will be made to the Everyman edition unless indicated otherwise.)

how the German philosophy of the period has *more conventionally* been understood. Coleridge, I think, was sympathetic to the tenor of the argument I have made in the more exclusively theoretical chapters previous. He was entirely at odds with the development of Romantic hermeneutics that enshrined the *aporia* within the very heart of textual interpretation. He was, as I shall demonstrate, in fact wholly sympathetic with the emphasis that Arendt has more recently placed on the crucial importance of agency and of meaning to interpretation and on the inherent problem of organicism – it informs his attack on the ‘mechanico-corpuscular’ philosophy that ran in English thought from Locke through Paley and to Bentham. Furthermore, the resuscitation of *meaningful prejudice* by Arendt underlies his presentation of the primary imagination. And his well-known political conservatism was based, much as Arendt’s own emphasis was, on a traditional – in fact ‘Classical’ – understanding of the importance of the *public sphere* in promoting and maintaining human freedom – as it is the space where the free self-disclosure of the human agent is protected and encouraged.

These observations suggest that Coleridge, even if he did approve of Kant and his contemporaries, must have read them rather differently than posterity has tended to. He would have needed to. The note of hermeneutic rebellion that Wordsworth sounded against his literary and cultural tradition in his presentation of the imagination, based on a power which in the Preface he calls ‘selection,’ Coleridge could just as easily have detected in Kant’s own attack on the *sensus communis* according to his operative ‘prejudice against prejudice’ – as Gadamer has read Kant. And of course he did detect it. But he chose to see an ulterior motive in Kant’s particular philosophical emphasis, one detecting in his *Vernunft* a drive for *meaning* that he, like Arendt (and Pannenberg) saw as a drive in the mind towards God. He therefore read him judiciously and selectively, for he would have disagreed with him on a number of issues *if* he had taken them at face value:

In spite therefore of his own declarations, I could never believe it was possible for him to have meant no more by his *Noumenon*, or Thing in Itself, than his mere words express; or that in his own conception he confined the external cause, for the *materiale* of our sensations, a matter without form, which is doubtless inconceivable. I entertained doubts likewise whether in his own mind he even laid all the stress which he appears to do on the moral postulates. (IX, 85)

Coleridge of course did not have the benefit of Kant’s acquaintance in the same way he had had Wordsworth’s. Whereas he could attribute Kant the benefit of the doubt and attribute him what he considered to be the best of motives, he could not do so in Wordsworth’s case,

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for he knew what he thought all too well.<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless his understanding of Kant's *Vernunft* as a drive towards *meaning* may yet be proved correct if Arendt, and the emphasis of this thesis, is correct.

I intend to restrict myself in the rest of the thesis to a focus upon the major poets falling in the Wordsworthian mould, Wordsworth and Coleridge of course, but Keats and Shelley as well because they make the most coherent and sustained challenge upon the issue of *meaning* in their ability to tease out the consequences of organicism and present them in vivid and compelling imagery. I hope as a consequence to redress the critical balance disrupted by the current critical overemphasis on individuality and 'internal sense' – understood in an 'organic' sense – or on 'historical or intellectual context' bereft of any sense of interest in the concerns consigned to the traditional areas of metaphysics and theology. I intend to do so by looking at the issue that these poets, living in a more enlightened age than ours, would have considered to be more crucial, the issue of transcendence or sublimity, which, as Frances Ferguson notes, is actually the *basis* of their aesthetic of individuation. The sense of this transcendence is something that Wordsworth calls 'feeling' and it is of central importance to his account of his poetics in the Preface.

The silence that he and his contemporaries refer to in their poetry is intimately related to it. Silence is the poet's often ecstatic expression of the *failure of language* to express that 'feeling,' a failure which, it turns out, is precisely what marks it out as the highest sort of poetry. For the failure verifies its very transcendent quality and expresses the 'something divine' that Shelley claimed 'to be about poetry,' the promotion of the spirit of man. It is a sign of this spirit's very universality that for Shelley, it even warranted removing the formal terms of personal agency as prejudicial criteria of poetics and of politics in pursuit of what he, Wordsworth and Keats would have understood as 'unity.' I shall address Shelley's radical emphasis more explicitly in the next chapter. But it will be my contention that this sense, this spirit, this *truth* of the 'unity of life' was what all three presented as an *alternative* to the traditional drive for *meaning* – as it was contained in the *sensus communis* – in their writing. Obviously this has manifold implications, not the least of which is the most readily apparent, the political. Their new form of common sense, devolved from the political sphere and

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<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Coleridge's Biographia, as the Editors to the Bollingen Edition of the work make clear, was prompted by Wordsworth's publication of a new edition of his Poems (1815), which included a great deal of discussion of the terms of 'imagination' and 'fancy' that Coleridge regarded as his own private property. It also included, tacked on as an afterthought, the original Preface to Lyrical Ballads to which Coleridge took exception. This haunted Coleridge throughout the composition of the Biographia, indeed at the stage it was half-complete (the second half was written first), Coleridge 'was

political terms of relations, i.e. in its purest form as public debate and correspondent *corporate action*, resulted from the *withdrawal* from this *sphere* and from its *characteristic feature of speech* and the *advocacy*, in its place, of the ultimately inexpressible, more *universal common sense* of what I shall describe as *intimacy*. However, it is not my *primary* intention to address the explicitly political dimension of this change in the sense of common sense that we detect in Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley's writing. My primary intention is to address the more theological or, if you will, metaphysical dimension of this change, if for no reason other than it was these Romantics' own *primary* emphasis.

The foremost issue at hand in Wordsworth's Preface relates to the question of whether it is true, as he claimed, that meaning is utterly inexpressible but nonetheless perceptible in contemplation upon bodily feeling (and can act to unify on that basis) or whether meaning is something that can be laid hold of by language and expressed directly. Wordsworth's claim for poetry, which actually has surprisingly little to do with language *per se*, nonetheless takes the *form* of an appeal for a *special kind* of language unlike that of normal language. He implies in the Preface that true poets use a form of language not only essentially superior to but indeed altogether different from that of *normal* use. It is not a distinction between poetry and prose that he is after. Nothing essential distinguishes the best prose from poetry, he says. It is a distinction between *real* language and language *per se*.

Despite appearances, this does not entirely contradict what he says about employing the 'real language of men' in his poetry, particularly that common to men of the rustic life. Common and normal are far from synonymous. In fact, it is one of Wordsworth's chief laments in the Preface that the powers of society's hegemonic institutions, which tended to *normalise* behaviour and disrupt natural affections (as his Lyrical Ballads so frequently depict), were so gaining in influence that the *normal* was now virtually indistinguishable from the *common*. This could largely be attributed to the growth of cities and the expansion of their regulated and bureaucratic society. What Wordsworth notes in the following passage are however the symptoms of the decline of the *sensus communis*:

... a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupation produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence

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still thinking of his work – both Preface and the poems – as a rival twin to Wordsworth's edition.' (Editors' Introduction, I).

hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have *conformed* themselves.(249, my italics)<sup>104</sup>

His appeal to 'the common' or 'the real' as opposed to the normal in his poetry and in his hermeneutics therefore has a deep anti-social undertone that I shall address in more detail shortly. Suffice it to say here that Wordsworth broadly associates the 'normal' with the 'normalising' and thus relates the apparently unrelated phenomenon of urban society with the 'artificial' norms and sensibilities of Neo-Classical aesthetics. He attributes both to a sort of *unnatural* and immoral decadence imposed on the human spirit.

But if Wordsworth, like Coleridge, registered the effects of the decline of the *sensus communis*, his poetic response to that decline was not, despite its intention, a remedy to it. In spite of its greater expressiveness, what distinguishes the particular 'common language' that he claims to have employed in his poetry is that it transcends the traditional designation of what language is. It is an organic process of mind and a resultant state of being. It is only the highest irony that this common language and its harmony with the forces within life was a symptom of the same crisis for poetry as was presented by the rational organisation of humanity into 'society.' It applied a Cartesian form of universality (which, if we recall, was characterised by its doubt of *all* forms of appearance) as the model for its conduct and its product, and it did so both in the name of the sanctity of the human heart and the progress of the human spirit. The great irony was that the sanctity of the human heart was being desecrated by the notion of social progress, and Wordsworth only masked that same process by converting it into a form of 'natural consciousness.' For what he understood as nature, was in fact a sense of universality attributed to the forces of nature. Wordsworth embraced life as an organic part of its larger processes.

### *From the Sensus Communis to the Common Sense of Intimacy*

In the same way that Gadamer demonstrated that Kant had failed to understand the political dimension of the *sensus communis* or to comprehend what *taste* involved (by seeing it as an inferior act of judgement in want of a higher act of the same), the Romantics' embrace of a poetic *process* advocating introspection upon feeling, the bodily connection with the forces of life, also entailed abandoning the *sensus communis* and the concept of the artist as a maker with fixed intentions, in favour of one that expressed certain 'natural' and necessary forces. They attributed its 'poetic power' to the particular natural and 'original genius' of

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<sup>104</sup> Brett & Jones. *Wordsworth & Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (1991) (All references to Wordsworth's Preface and to the *Lyrical Ballads* will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated)

certain individuals. Milton for example was understood to have successfully created his poetry because he was born to do so. It was a part of the need of his nature – as a silkworm produced silk from its innards. It is not altogether a moot point to decide whether the *sensus communis* and the idea of the artist as a maker of a work of art was abandoned for the sake of a more *natural* expression (as the poets themselves naturally claimed) or whether it was an inevitable result of the decline in the *sensus communis* and in the ‘prejudices’ of traditional belief that had already been brought about by the onset of society and the promotion of its normative and totalitarian powers as a substitute for more accountable political powers. But, ultimately, it is most important to observe that both effects are a function of the same changes and reflect a decline in adherence to the ideas of formal agency and causality. They replaced the moribund *sensus communis* and its inherited emphasis on the *purpose* or on the *meaning* of life with a form of common sense that reacted against society, but was strangely in tune with it and its unnatural promotion of the life-processes.<sup>105</sup>

Nonetheless for the purposes of this discussion, it is more important to recognise the basic fact that the simultaneous decline of both the *sensus communis* and the traditional tradition of the artist as a maker imitating the divine Maker was not merely coincidental. The Romantic artistic simulation of the life-processes brought the inexpressible, i.e. the felt, into the heart of the aesthetic process as its prejudice in the stead of tradition and the prejudices of the world of appearances.<sup>106</sup> This then became the basis of a new and less discriminatory form of common sense, one which like Kant’s redefinition of taste needed ‘no higher form of judgement.’ I would like to bring that into bolder relief by looking at a commonly noted artistic tendency of the Romantic age.

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<sup>105</sup> This change was rather ironically though understandably associated with *traditional* authority because it was, after all, traditional authorities that *initially* indulged in the increase in power that social organisation brought. Nonetheless, the somewhat ambivalent designation ‘Enlightened absolutism’/ despotism characterises the *unprecedented* type of change in the workings of government by historians. The effect however is clear. What traditional authorities embraced soon embraced them. The forces of the universe were adopted as a perspective against the natural and traditional boundaries e.g. of the political or the family for the purposes of ‘the common good,’ life.

Perhaps the clearest indication that society constitutes the public organisation of the life process itself may be found in the fact that in a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of labourers and jobholders; in other words, they became at once centred around the one activity necessary to sustain life. (Arendt. *THC*, 46).

<sup>106</sup> Here the English language neither has nor can follow the change that has come about with Romanticism’s individualistic aesthetics. The problem lies in expressing the internal cause of this incomprehensibility. All of the idioms of the language expressing a lack of comprehension are external – incomprehensibility can envelop, shroud, descend upon or surround something, but it is impossible to express how it can be incomprehensible *from within*. It might be answered that it is possible to say that something *is* incomprehensible or that one fails to comprehend. But these fail to capture the change in emphasis.

*Ut pictura poesis?*

The most popular manner of expressing this change in the sense of 'common sense' (and certainly the one most explicitly concerned with the artistic issues at hand) has been to note the shift from the neo-Classical to the Romantic period in the somewhat simplistic terms of a shift from a mimetic to an expressive poetics. Shelley described the latter form of poetics in an organic manner characteristic of the period:

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient. 'The mind is its own place and can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.' But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subject to the accident of surrounding impressions... whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos... It compels us to *feel* that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know.<sup>107</sup>

The German poet Novalis expressed himself in similar terms: 'poetry... is representation of the spirit, of the inner world in its totality.' Elevating the natural to supernatural status was in fact the principle purpose of Wordsworth's contribution to the Lyrical Ballads according to Coleridge. However, the experience of the supernatural and the process of 'subliming experience' from the quotidian and the mundane to express the 'inner world' should not be misunderstood by Wordsworth's frequent references to nature. It came about not by focussing upon nature, but rather in turning the mind's eye onto a certain idea of itself in relation to nature:

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my Reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. But speaking in less general language, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature.<sup>108</sup>

It is by selectively *observing* the play of passion within, the organic response to the world without, that Wordsworth thinks leads to poetry.

A concise manner of grasping this change, relating ideas of the organism to the supernatural, that was very popular with the poets and critics of the day was to choose an analogy for poetry in the other arts. The change in the analogy that was used is instructive in seeing how the Romantics differed from the artists leading up to the Romantic period. Prior to the Romantics, the main analogy for poetry was that of painting. The ideal of the neo-

<sup>107</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, 505. (my italics). At least as suitable, and more trenchant, is his chiasmic remark that, 'The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.' (485)

<sup>108</sup> 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' (1802), 247.



Classicist poets was to create a poem like a picture, *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>109</sup> This extremely popular motif of the eighteenth century virtually disappeared in the major criticism of the Romantic period, Abrams tells us, and it was replaced by one more in tune with the organic processes, and the continuous processes of introspection. Referring to the passage just quoted in Shelley's Defence, he writes:

...the comparisons between poetry and painting that survive are causal, or, as in the instance of (Shelley's) mirror, show the canvas reversed in order to image the inner substance of the poet. In place of painting, music becomes the art frequently pointed to as having a profound affinity with poetry. For if a picture seems the nearest thing to a mirror-image of the external world, music, of all the arts, is the most remote: except in the trivial echoism of programmatic passages, it does not duplicate aspects of sensible nature, nor can it be said, in any obvious sense, to refer to any state of affairs outside itself. As a result music was the first of the arts to be generally regarded as non-mimetic in nature; and in the theory of German writers of the 1790's, music came to be the art most immediately expressive of spirit and emotion, constituting the very pulse and quiddity of passion made public.<sup>110</sup>

Music was of course so appealing to the aesthetic of organicism precisely because it evoked a tremulous response in its auditor that evoked a more enduring internal reminder of the connection of the internal to the external than did the more cerebral and external visual arts.

The difference with which the Aeolian lyre, one of the favourite symbols for composition in both the neo-Classical and the Romantic periods, was treated by the poets of the respective periods is particularly useful to demonstrate the change in aesthetics towards organicism. Invented in 1650, it had become particularly popular with poets around the middle of the eighteenth century because its music could quite literally be attributed to nature rather than to human art. Its initial popularity as a subject for poetic reflection probably betrayed the growing dissatisfaction with increasingly prescriptive neo-Classical treatises on the rules for art. But it was not until the nineteenth century that the lyre became an analogy for the poetic mind as well as the subject of the poet's description, as it is here in one of Shelley's metaphors of creativity:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an *internal adjustment* of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. (Defence, 480, my italics)<sup>111</sup>

<sup>109</sup> A number of other scholars have delved into this tradition in relation to Romanticism in greater detail. Many of them I discuss below in connection with Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' which provides a fascinating confrontation of the old aesthetic with the new.

<sup>110</sup> Abrams. The Mirror and the Lamp, 50.

<sup>111</sup> A similar use of the lyre is also to be found at the outset of Wordsworth's The Prelude (1805) and ties in closely with the significant 'corresponding breeze' he alludes to throughout:

We note that it is the evocation of the internal response, suggestive of an organic relationship, that so excites Shelley about this metaphor and it is precisely because it reveals the *nature* of man Shelley saw him. He was not alone in this insistence on seeing man as an organism. Friedrich Schlegel, famous for his definition of Romantic irony and the literary fragment, was so desperate to see music as the more natural form of art to mankind that he attributed the Greek writer Simonides' failure to mention music in his famous description of poetry as a 'speaking picture' to the fact that it was self-evident: music always accompanied the reading of *lyric* poetry.<sup>112</sup>

There are of course some significant passages in which the analogy of music is used in English Romantic poetry, but they are almost invariably in conjunction with both nature and inexpressibility or silence. Indeed, this is the association that Keats makes in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' where he likens the *silence* of the depictions he beholds on a marble urn to the 'music of the spirit,' the 'ditties of no tone.' But it would be too bold to claim that the English Romantics favoured the analogy of music to the same degree of fascination or commitment as their German contemporaries. It is only one analogy among others for them.<sup>113</sup> An image that is much more popular, certainly with Wordsworth, is the wind, the

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It was a splendid evening, and my soul  
 Did once again make trial of the strength  
 Restored to her afresh; nor did she want  
 Eolian visitations—but the harp  
 Was soon defrauded... (I, 101-05)

<sup>112</sup> This would have seemed doubly imperative to Schlegel because of the strength of the association of the poetry of Ancient Greece, as a 'natural' and 'naïve' culture, with the sublime. It has subsequently been demonstrated that Greek poetics works on slightly different principles than those of the Roman tradition, in particular in regard to meter. A similar connotation of music and natural production must have informed the choice of the title of the 'Lyrical Ballads' for the somewhat disparate collection of poetry that Wordsworth and Coleridge composed.

<sup>113</sup> To this day, music is a far more popular analogy for the poetic arts in Germany than it is in England and is also a crucial element of its philosophy and literary criticism. Andrew Bowie attributes the importance of music in the German tradition to the perceived *incapacity of language* for truth. He acknowledges in music the same phenomenon I trace here to silence in English Romantic poetry. Both phenomena reflect negatively on the capacity of language to be true (as a result of the decline of the *sensus communis*) and offer their alternatives with greater 'internal' validity:

The understanding of music in German philosophy after Kant cannot be separated from that philosophy's perception of language. My reason for concentrating on music for much of the rest of the book is not because of a desire to write a specialised philosophy of music. The fact is that the relation of music to language, whether in the sense of music being seen as a language, or as revealing what language is unable to reveal, serves as an important indicator of the ways in which aesthetics in this period is linked to truth. Music can be regarded as a deficient means of articulation, or as a privileged one. This nexus is fundamental to the philosophical history of subjectivity... (*Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*. (1990). 176)

The question that is begged by this perceived deficiency is wherein it lies. The obvious answer is in language's inability to express the organic ideal of 'feeling.' Language has decidedly inappropriate notions of causality inherent in it that mitigate against it being the art form *par excellence* of this

'corresponding breeze.' It is distinctive for remaining quasi-pictorial and natural – or at the very least, its evidence is more *visible* than is music. The wind carries many of the same connotations and implications of inspiration and of 'truth to the human spirit' that music does in the German Romantic tradition. Nonetheless, music remains useful as a means of comparing poetry to other art forms even in the English Romantics' poetics and giving us some objective criteria by which to discern the change from the pictorial tradition.

It is not the intention of this chapter to make repeated reference to Wordsworth's poetry, let alone to provide a 'close reading' to extract various propositions I then wish, organically, to argue from. However, a look at a particularly famous one of Wordsworth's contributions to the Lyrical Ballads would probably be helpful to illustrate the tendencies I have been arguing to characterise 'Romantic poetry' and its patent organicism. His 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' admirably expresses many of the claims I shall make in general about his poetry and the workings of his hermeneutics. It is worth recording the process of thought he describes in it and the *significance* he attributes to it. The poem is prompted by his return, after five years absence, to the site of his childhood, whose quiet beauty, he recognises, has accompanied him even in 'mid the din/ Of towns and cities'(26-27). The sense of serenity that 'nature' bestowed to him that he now encounters again in its presence gives him cause to reflect on its consonance with another, more important sense, that 'aspect more sublime' 'that blessed mood' gently prompted by 'affections' that lead to a state of tranquillity, at which point 'we are laid asleep/ In body, and become a living soul.'(46-47) It is the spiritual conversion of this 'aspect more sublime' that allows us, he attests, to 'see into the life of things.'(49) What Wordsworth describes in other words is akin to a 'religious experience' that he *feels, in retrospect*, as an inexpressible, 'organic' correspondence between himself and a sense of stillness bestowed upon him by nature.

...I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The *still, sad music* of humanity...  
...And I have felt  
A *presence* that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense *sublime*  
Of something more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the *mind of man*,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels

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aesthetic. But the underlying organicism is the reason I have seen feeling, rather than music or silence as central to the new aesthetic.

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (89-92; 94-104, my italics)<sup>114</sup>

What is particularly interesting about Wordsworth's description of this experience of 'nature' is that although he uses words to convey it, the words he uses are those which suggest his own words' failure to express it. He looks on *nature*, but not nature per se, rather as a *reflected* and *historicised* (eternalised) experience of 'nature'; the music he hears, connoting *humanity*, is sad and *still*; the *presence* he *feels* leads him not to elevated *language*, but to elevated *thoughts*; the sense is not *sensual* but *sublime*; and the situation in which it takes place is everywhere that the *mind* of man is, disencumbered of its corporeal, worldly frame, i.e. the *universe*. Wordsworth's evanescent use of language 'expresses' his sense of agency.

It is interesting to note, though it rarely has been paid much notice by critics, that Coleridge, despite his extensive acquaintance with their work, signally diverges from his German contemporaries on this central point. Music figures all too rarely in his writing. In fact an allusion to (contemporary) *painting* formed the basis of one of the objections that Coleridge made to the followers of Wordsworth:

Something analogous to the materials and structure of modern poetry I seem to have noticed (but here I beg to be understood as speaking with the utmost diffidence) in our common landscape painters. Their foregrounds and intermediate distances are comparatively unattractive; while the main interest of the landscape is thrown into the background, where mountains and torrents and castles forbid the eye to proceed, and nothing tempts it to trace its way back again. But in the works of the great Italian and Flemish masters, the front and middle objects of the landscape are the most obvious and determinate, the interest gradually dies away in the background, and the charm and peculiar worth of the picture consists *not so much in the specific object which it conveys to the understanding in a visual language formed by the substitution of figures for words* as in the beauty and harmony of the colours, lines and expression with which the objects are represented. Hence novelty of subject was rather avoided than sought for. Superior excellence in the manner of treating the same subjects was the trial and test of the artist's merit.<sup>115</sup>

It is significant that while invoking painting as an analogy for poetry, Coleridge avoids offering the typical *ut pictura poesis* rationale of imitative power. This signals that the real issue for him here (and the leitmotif for him elsewhere in the *Biographia*), is the non-sense of a philosophy and the lack of power of a poetics that cannot claim a coherent perspective of agency. Neither Descartes' 'universal perspective' nor the organicist understanding of life according to its processes delivers such a sense.

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<sup>114</sup> Shelley makes an explicit allusion and allegiance to this vision and this language in *Mont Blanc*.

<sup>115</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, XVI, 183. (my italics)

This appeal to painting does not necessitate a collapse into a defence of blank copying for him then. It had a distinction he wished to make between imitation and copying. The difference was contained in the former's 'apparent naturalness of...representation, as raised and qualified by an imperceptible infusion of the author's own knowledge and talent, which infusion does indeed constitute it an imitation, as distinguished from a mere copy.' (BL, XVII, 190) In other words, he suggested that these new portraits of nature (and poetic efforts in imitation of organic processes of feeling) were unnatural. The organic perspective rebels against the terms of agency of the primary imagination and thus, to use Arendt's words, 'against existence as it has been given.' What it seems to me that Coleridge is grasping at in attacking this new school of 'Wordsworthian poets' and landscape painters is the loss of perspective that is the effect of the loss of the *sensus communis* and the embrace of the universal perspective of introspection. Coleridge suggests that the great irony of this artistic expression of what is apparently inmost (and therefore could, by virtue of its proximity, be thought most clearly expressible) is what simultaneously obliterates any sense of perspective for anyone save the poet himself. The seed is scattered, but it misses the furrow of the developed sense of the language and avoids the natural prejudice of agency. The perspective taken on the 'landscape' may be universal, but those standing on earth cannot benefit from it without the use of a telescope or, as the case may be, a microscope.

*Religious language, the poet as prophetic amanuensis for the silent voice of nature and the 'selection' of transcendence*

I would now like to turn to look at how the organic 'universal perspective' adopted by Romantic hermeneutics (which I am disassociating Coleridge from) was applied to the discussion of 'religious language.' According to both Wordsworth and Coleridge poetry was 'religious language' in the sense that it possessed the metaphysical power to express the abiding *unity* of things. However Wordsworth distinguished himself from Coleridge in suggesting that the distinctiveness of religious language (and therefore of the nature of unity) stemmed *naturally* from symbiosis with nature. By the time he had come to write the Biographia, Coleridge was decidedly of the opinion that, on the contrary, language's capacity to express unity lay in (and always had lain in) the fact that it could not be reduced to nature or understood as a mere organic response to it. This was *fundamentally* the case with the word of God, the express terms and agent of his primary imagination, but it was also true of

the great poets, the defenders of the language, who employed the secondary imagination.<sup>116</sup> With those restrictions in mind, Coleridge wrote what initially sounds to be something quite similar to what Wordsworth did, that 'the best part of human language, properly so called, is derived *from reflections on the acts of the mind itself*.'

He reveals his fundamental difference from Wordsworth in explaining those acts of the mind though. He explains them as acts informed by the prejudices 'written' on the human mind by God through the traditional belief in the truths of the Bible and Him to whom they point. They cannot be reduced to 'natural man' and his organic relationships, for language 'is formed by a voluntary appropriation of *fixed* symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man.'<sup>117</sup>

This fundamental disagreement with Wordsworth led him, in the second half of the Biographia, to avail himself of both literary tradition and literary criticism to demonstrate two things. It led him firstly to demonstrate that poetry does not function as Wordsworth suggests it does and never has. Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth was primarily directed at two manifestly incongruous things, Wordsworth's praise of the 'low and rustic life' as a seed-ground for the poetic temperament – because of its allegedly unsullied organic communion with 'nature' – and his claim to have *imitated* (if purified) rustic diction in his own poetry. However something far more profound seems at issue for him than exposing that incongruity. The issue linking the two was inherent in Wordsworth's definition of poetry. Coleridge especially objected to the hermeneutic claim Wordsworth made in pronouncing his own particular *stylistic* approach, blurring notions of causality, temporality and personal agency, to be a touchstone for poetry of *all kinds*, as if it had wholly transcended all formal criteria of judgement. To put it another way (for this is the issue at hand), he objected to his Preface's tendency to argue *as if the natural 'feeling' his poetry testified to could function as the cultivated notion of taste*. This claim for feeling as the highest form of taste, in all of its Kantian universality, was impossible for Coleridge to accept. For it implied that one must 'reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of style that were not included in what (he)... called the language of *real life*.'<sup>118</sup> Wordsworth's allegedly unprejudiced organic

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<sup>116</sup> It is thus that Coleridge echoes Dante in proclaiming it 'the first duty of the poet' to guard 'the purity of their native tongue.' 'For language is the armoury of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests.' (BL, XVI, 182).

<sup>117</sup> BL, XVII, 197 (my italics).

<sup>118</sup> BL, XIV, 169. The problem with Wordsworth's appeal to *real life* is just like his appeal to *nature*. They are, as Coleridge points out, equivocal.

processes had a decided prejudice against the idea of agency, Divine and human, and traditional belief:

The feelings with which, as Christians, we contemplate a mixed congregation rising or kneeling before their common maker, Mr. Wordsworth would have us entertain at all times, as men and as readers; and by excitement of this lofty but prideless impartiality in poetry, he might hope to have encouraged its continuance in real life. (BL, XXII, 253)

Secondly, it led Coleridge to demonstrate that if poetry did work on the organic premises Wordsworth suggested, that the *aporia* of incomprehensibility would result as an artistic phenomenon – as it indeed already was resulting in his contemporaries' art. I shall return to this fundamental divergence of the Biographia with the Preface later in the chapter.

Firstly though I would like to explore Wordsworth's own line of thinking about the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. It can be traced to a broader movement of Enlightenment thinking that Coleridge was at pains to discredit in the first half of the Biographia. In the main addition of the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802), the subsection entitled 'What is a Poet?', Wordsworth provides us with such a discussion of the nature of poetry and of the role of the poet. He makes both a unifying and universal claim for poetry. The 'object (of poetry) is *truth*,' he says, 'not individual and local, but general and operative' and Poetry itself 'is the image of man and nature.'(257) In accordance with such a universal and unifying power to grasp truth, the man who apprehends and mediates this 'general and operative' truth, the true poet, is distinguishable from other men by his more active power of empathy, by his disposition 'to be affected... by absent things as if they were present' and by his 'greater capacity and readiness to express what he thinks and feels.' An open mind and an extraordinary facility of expression are to be requisite marks of the true poet. However, they are not sufficient to enable him to be the poet that Wordsworth envisions. He suggests that a man's capacity and willingness are not *effective* to the end of *poetry* by their application to expression alone. That is mere organic sensitivity and could still be regarded to conform to a model of the artist as a maker. But Wordsworth's next suggestion removes that possibility, for he suggests that a would-be poet's capacity and willingness are only effective to the end of poetry in so far as they are *deferred* to the processes of organic self-consciousness, felt as much as thought:

...our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the

understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated. (246-47)

This reciprocal process of deferring thought to feeling and vice versa *ad infinitum* results in what may be described, for lack of better words, as a state of introspective beatitude. The constant (and unbreakable) 'hermeneutic circle' of this process means that Wordsworth's poetry always *tends*, as we saw in Tintern Abbey, towards *inexpressibility and incomprehensibility*. There is no authority that can justify breaking with the truth of self-reflection definitively because the aesthetic always calls for a further process of self-legitimation.

The attraction of this inexpressible process for Wordsworth is that it 'expresses' unity, i.e. in so far as the poet is thereby able to identify, to become one, with his object. If he does not name, he does not 'objectify,' i.e. he does not differentiate himself from his object. It was Wordsworth's clear didactic aim and hermeneutic belief that this state of 'introspective beatitude' that marked the true poet and suffused his poetry could also be mediated to the reader and that the reader could thereby be transported (or transport himself) into a similar state of organic bliss. In order to do so, the poet had to be an active passivist. Clearly not everyone was able to be so because of the situation they had been placed in. To have any hope of achieving this state of serenity, it is clear to Wordsworth that the turbulent life of the city and its conforming society must be avoided; it was invidious both to this blissful state of mind and to the possibility of mediating it. For the true poet must 'select' by virtue of his real nature what is really 'natural' – and that very nature of his is best cultivated, Wordsworth insists, by a lack of cultivation, i.e. an intimate acquaintance with nature and the passage of change to its beautiful forms. It is expressed by the poets, for:

Theirs is the language of the heavens, the power,  
The thought, the image, and the silent joy;  
Words are but under-agents in their souls –  
When they are grasping with their greatest strength  
They do not breathe among them. (The Prelude (1805), XII, 270-74)

It is clear even from this brief excerpt that the commonly understood relationship of Wordsworth's thought towards feeling is more complicated than a description of it as 'expressive' would suggest, in part because nature has an extraordinary meaning to him.<sup>119</sup> This complexity is only confirmed by the relationship of the poet to language itself. For with this deferral that leads to a transcendent state of feeling, Wordsworth also implies that the

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<sup>119</sup> A fine example of this is in Chapter Eighth of The Prelude (1805), subtitled 'Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.'



poet's language itself can actually be a form of hindrance to his poetic power 'to express what he thinks and feels.' Here we must give due account of the context in which Wordsworth wrote to understand what he meant about language. He made it clear that language as it had normally come to be used had become thoroughly tainted by society and by rational thought 'that promised to abstract the hopes of man/ Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth/ For ever in a purer element.' (*Prelude*, X, 807-09) The poet, as he demonstrates dramatically in the account of his 'fall' from being initially 'a child of Nature' (X, 752) to 'having two natures in me' (X, 869), was in constant danger of having his language socialised and, in the process, alienated from reality and truth. Wordsworth associated the logos with socialised, i.e. cultivated reason and pronounced it opposed to feeling.

To understand how Wordsworth could reach such an apparently improbable conclusion linking society and the language of reason with the loss of the sort of language of feeling that his poetry tapped into, we must look to the historical and intellectual context in which the *Lyrical Ballads* were written. As was discussed in the second chapter, the key (and unprecedented) political development of the modern age was the emergence of mass society. Society had effectively sounded the death-knell of both the public and private spheres by removing the distinctions between them. It consequently took on characteristics of the openness of the former and the concern with the maintenance of life of the latter. But it had another consequence that is particularly relevant to this discussion of the Romantic movement and the creation of a new form of common sense. Hannah Arendt reveals an insufficiently acknowledged aspect of Wordsworth's poetry in her explanation of the discovery of *intimacy* by his French precursor, Rousseau, and his protest on behalf of the 'holiness of the heart's affections' against the pressures placed upon him by society to redirect his affections solely in its direction:

The first articulate explorer and to an extent even theorist of intimacy was Jean-Jacques Rousseau... He arrived at his discovery through a rebellion not against the oppression of the state but against society's unbearable oppression of the human heart, its intrusion upon an innermost region in man that until then had needed no special protection. The intimacy of the heart, unlike the private household, has no objective tangible place in the world, nor can the society against which it protests and asserts itself be localised with the same certainty as the public space. To Rousseau, both the intimate and the social were, rather, subjective modes of human existence, and in his case, it was as though Jean-Jacques rebelled against a man called Rousseau. The modern individual and his endless conflicts, his inability either to be at home in society or to live outside it altogether, his ever-changing moods and the radical subjectivism of his emotional life, was born in this rebellion of the heart... The astonishing flowering of poetry and music from the middle of the eighteenth century until almost the last third of the nineteenth, accompanied by the rise of the novel, the only entirely social art form, coinciding with a no less striking decline of all the more public arts, especially architecture, is sufficient testimony to a close relationship between the social and the intimate. (THC, 38-39.)

Arendt's observation suggests that Wordsworth, like Rousseau, based a new form of poetics on the 'common sense' of intimacy, the sense of intimacy of course being inexpressible. We can see evidence of this focus upon intimacy (and in particular the effects of the disruption of the private life, the homeless individual) and its hermeneutic of empathetic identification throughout Wordsworth's contribution to the Lyrical Ballads and in his later poetry.

### *Intimacy and natura naturans*

The remedy that Wordsworth proposes to counter the ills of society is to turn away from it and its associated language to feelings of intimacy, feelings that he says are prompted by nature rather than the conforming social prejudices. He advocates a turn to these feelings as if he could circumvent social prejudices altogether and recreate the terms of *human life* without them. And since human language is, as a social medium, itself an ill, this return to primal feeling must recur again and again, ultimately even at the expense of his own language. The pattern he suggests appears to *reverse* the Cartesian emphasis on arrogating authority to the *rational self* by suggesting an organic connection to the world that Descartes' *cogito* had denied. The universal prejudice of the *cogito* had worked against the authority of received opinion of tradition and the relation to the world contained in the *sensus communis*. However, Wordsworth's suggestion only exacerbates the Cartesian prejudice by historicising it and pushing the anti-traditional emphasis to its logical conclusion. He transfers the locus of authority from the socialised adult world and the adult's 'reasoning power' to that of the child and its non-judgemental, open relationship to the stimuli of the world. Thus he writes:

My heart leaps up when I behold  
 A Rainbow in the sky:  
 So was it when my life began;  
 So is it now I am a Man;  
 So be it when I shall grow old,  
 Or let me die!  
 The Child is Father of the Man;  
 And I could wish my days to be  
 Bound each to each by natural piety.<sup>120</sup>

The child at its earliest stage in life is of course an infant, literally a non-speaker. Speech is a dangerous thing in Wordsworth's eyes precisely because it inculcates agency. He illustrates its obvious danger in poems such as his 'Anecdote for Fathers,' where he narrates the effect of an overbearing father in forcing his son into a lie by insisting on a *reason* for the boy's preference of 'Kilve's smooth shore' to 'Liswyn farm.'

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<sup>120</sup> Wordsworth. 'My Heart Leaps Up.' The Poems of William Wordsworth. I. (1907). 115.

His 'classical statement' on the child and its significance as an unprejudiced being though occurs in his famous ode presenting 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.' In that ode, he comes closest to revealing an answer to the mystery of the originator of the child and depicts the forces that oppose it. He pushes the issue of origin back beyond infancy and displays how far the Enlightenment 'prejudice against prejudice' continues to inform his own organicist thought. His enigmatic suggestion that the 'Child is Father of the Man' of course had begged the question of who the child's father was. Wordsworth's clear answer in the ode, Nature, is somewhat obscured by the fact that he appeals to two distinct senses of it, each antagonistic to the other, which are nonetheless undifferentiated in name. The ode is characteristic, if more explicit than usual, in identifying the originator as *natura naturans*, which he refers to equally as God. Birth is treated not as the beginning of life, *natura naturata*, but instead negatively as the beginning of a loss of glory from *natura naturans*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (58-66)

The poem narrates the infant's gradual decline to a state of being socialised and familiarised to *natura naturata*, the world of cause-and-effect, bringing with it the loss of the original 'visionary gleam.'

For as the child grows, 'Shades of the prison-house begin to close' on the light from whence man came until 'At length the Man perceives it die away,/ And fade into the light of common day.' (75-76) *Natura naturata*, the prison warden or, as Wordsworth more benignly calls her:

The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came. (81-84)

But as the 'the little Actor cons another part' in *imitating* social mores at each stage of his decline to adulthood, 'As if his whole vocation/ Were endless imitation' (106-07), his world becomes noisy and dark. Of course this noisy and dark world is not his true vocation though. The ode continues to suggest a means of salvation from this inevitable decline into adulthood.

His 'Soul's immensity' forever broods beneath the surface of his 'exterior resemblance,' intimating the immortal state from whence he came and auguring its potential return.

This return to native innocence is possible through the application of the 'prejudice against prejudice,' or as Wordsworth more poetically expresses it:

...those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings; (141-43)

For these obstinate questionings of the organism rightly conceiving himself in harmony with natural processes are inspired by re-collections of the pre-experiences of early childhood:

...those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;  
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence... (148-55)

There is course a potentially positive change in the organism. These affections are no longer immediately available to the poet as they were as a child, but they can be appreciated by the very fact that the poet knows what it is to have been without them. He must be content and find:

Strength in what remains behind  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;

This 'primal sympathy' leads him to what he calls 'the philosophic mind,' which unites this sympathy with a mature attempt to re-collect it via the 'prejudice against prejudice,' the 'aspect more sublime' he referred to in Tintern Abbey.<sup>121</sup>

Wordsworth thus proposes a means of human regeneration by turning to natura naturans and, in particular, through the reflected 'obstinate questionings' of the sensual experience of the natura naturata and the causal implications it suggests, by turning to a 'pre-experienced prejudice' which no words can be found to express effectively. The creation,

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<sup>121</sup> Roger Lundin, in his very useful chapter in *The Promise of Hermeneutics* entitled, 'Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition' traces a recurrent pattern of self-fathering through various mutations in English and American literature, making many similar observations to those I have presented here about the 'Intimations Ode.' He remarks: 'With romanticism... the primary mechanism of the Cartesian quest changed, and its scope grew dramatically, as intuition and recollection replaced ratiocination empirical study as the means of truth. Romanticism was to continue the work of the Enlightenment, but only on different terms.' (22) I discuss the Romantics' historicising of Cartesianism in more detail below.

marriage and love of this organic form of intimacy are the central Romantic project, not just for Wordsworth, but for Shelley and Keats as well. Harold Bloom testifies to this in one of the dramatic forms this project characteristically takes, that of the 'quest-romance':

The man prophesied by the Romantics is a central man who is always in the process of becoming his own begetter...the full Romantic quest...must make all things new, and then marry what it has made.<sup>122</sup>

This inexpressible state of the organism in harmony with nature, Wordsworth suggests, is the experience that the poet should seek to mediate, even in (and perhaps particularly in) conjunction with the things and events of the common day:

For the discerning intellect of Man,  
When wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion, shall find these  
A simple produce of the common day. (52-55)<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Harold Bloom. Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism. (1970). 24.

<sup>123</sup> 'Preface to the Excursion,' The Poems of Wordsworth. III. (1907).

### *Selection in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

Wordsworth's emphasis on the 'primal sympathy' of the 'philosophic mind' is implicit in the principle entirely crucial to his Preface (normally neglected by critics) that he calls 'selection.' He repeatedly states (in various formulations) that it is the primary activity of the poet. This process of selection is what makes the Wordsworthian common language uncommon, i.e. natural (organic). It may have suffered critical neglect because of the apparent nonchalance with which he proposes it and the naïveté with which he assumes it is even possible. Wordsworth's process of 'selection' is a function of the passive manner in which he says the poems of the Lyrical Ballads confront the reader, each with their own 'worthy purpose.' He attempts to clarify further what he means by these poems' purposes, disavowing a prejudiced intention to said purpose:

Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose *formally conceived*; but I believe that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose.(246, my italics)

This claim that there is a lack of design in his poems except that which the objects themselves presented leads to the entirely revolutionary suggestion (presented almost as an afterthought): that 'feeling' ought to lead actions. It is revolutionary because the suggestion entails nothing other than the *usurpation of the role of language in the vita activa*, bequeathed in the *sensus communis*, by the 'silent' life of the feeling of the organism:

... it is proper that I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.(248)

It is therefore not just a different means of artistic representation that Wordsworth proposes, but a different orientation of morality and of human existence altogether.

Wordsworth's emphasis on 'primal sympathy' in the Intimations Ode and an 'aspect more sublime' in Tintern Abbey has its correspondence in his emphasis upon 'selection' in the Preface. The difference in the sort of thought, feeling and nature that Wordsworth is suggesting from those we are wont to associate with all these words is made somewhat clearer in one of his more obscure passages in the Preface. He makes it clear that his purpose is not expressive. It is not to *describe* feelings or to present his own: it is to unite them in a transcendent space by *removing the differences* between them. It is interesting to note his use of the word 'situation' in the context of that transcendent space, as it substitutes a state of being for what we might expect, an action:

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of the Poet it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his *feelings* near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and *identify his own feelings with theirs*; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle on which I have so much insisted, namely of *selection*... (256, my italics)

He asserts that the more the poet applies his poetic power of 'selection' to 'situate' himself in the place of other persons, 'the deeper will be his faith that *no words*, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the *emanations of reality and truth*.' (257, my italics) The true Wordsworthian poet would if it were possible, one concludes from this, only feel deeply in primal, organic sympathy, and never speak or write at all.<sup>124</sup> He would 'select' or, as this procedure suggests, *recreate himself* and be 'identified' in the 'situation' of the object of suffering. 'Pleasure' results from this vicarious act of identification of feeling.

However since a poet does of course write, his writing will meet the same end of creating an overbalance of pleasure in the reader by taking his emotions through a purgative process of introspective silence. This will produce a state in keeping with the universality of the introspection and the essence of the otherwise crude emotion:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (266)

The product of Wordsworth's process of distilling feeling from the tranquillity of absence is transcendental or universal emotion. It is the result of the sublimation of personal differences (in the name of intimacy) to the ethos of perceiving the Divine being in the sublime as *natura naturans*. This emphasis is altogether strange; and it has not lost its strangeness through two hundred years of familiarity. The main reason it is strange, I think, is that Wordsworth was

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<sup>124</sup> This is because the object of Wordsworth's poetry is not actually of this world. It is:

Not of outward things

Done visibly for other minds – words, signs,  
Symbols or actions – but of my own heart...

Therefore his expression always necessarily encounters the same difficulty, a failing he confesses:

...I wished to touch

With hand however weak – but in the main  
It lies far hidden from the reach of words.  
Points have we all of us within our souls  
Where all stand single; this I feel, and make



not actually principally concerned with cultivating the poetics of the common man at all or the writing of poetry in its traditional sense. That is an addition he makes to it that is secondary to its main matter. As Coleridge argues, Wordsworth's own poetry does not tend to that conclusion, nor does his poetry argue for the rather patronising defence of ordinary language, i.e. a *lingua communis* that his Preface seems to do.<sup>125</sup>

What he intends instead is revealed by something that he writes towards the end of his argument in the Preface. He tries there, revealingly, to defend himself against the interpretation of his theory as that of a *lingua communis*, even if he does so in a way that almost leaves the impression that even *he* is rather unconvinced by it. The convolutions he undergoes are evident and almost painful. In a passage like the following one can imagine his intended audience, as he no doubt did, as a rather unimpressed Mr. S.T. Coleridge, Esq.. It gives the distinct impression of touching on a matter on which we know there had already been a protracted debate between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth is dismissive of the latter's call for proof:

The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the Poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration which depends upon ignorance, the Poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves. To this may be added, that while he is only selecting from the real language of men, or, which amounts to the same thing, composing accurately in the *spirit of such selection*, he is treading on safe ground, and we know what we are to expect from him. (261, my italics)

Despite that defensive tone however, it is obvious here, if it were not elsewhere, that Wordsworth thinks that his emphasis on the process of 'selection' actually exonerates him from the charge of making an argument for a poetics based on a *lingua communis per se*.

Once we understand the importance and significance that Wordsworth was attributing to the word 'selection' in the Preface, we must wonder about the direction of Coleridge's attack on him in the Biographia. We must question whether Coleridge *actually misunderstood* Wordsworth by construing his argument as that for a *lingua communis* or whether he perhaps had an ulterior motive, e.g. to disarm the increasing flock of Wordsworth's servile imitators who were misunderstanding his argument in the Preface. I suspect that neither was the case. It seems to me that the key lies in recognising that what

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Breathings for incommunicable powers. (The Prelude, III, 174-76; 184-89)



Wordsworth refers to as 'selection' here, he elsewhere depicts as the *original* aspect of the 'Imagination.' The 'primary imagination' is of course the central definition in Coleridge's Biographia, and I think a matter on which Coleridge implicitly corrects Wordsworth's theory, though he does not do so at the point he presents the imagination in his argument.<sup>126</sup> My contention, which I shall pursue in more detail below, is that Coleridge viewed Wordsworth's argument for the 'organic basis' of a common language to be only the reverse side of a universalist argument. This dualism was a pattern that he demonstrated repeatedly in the first half of the Biographia to have characterised philosophy since the time of Descartes. What he was implicitly questioning in disputing Wordsworth's claim to base his poetics on common language was its idea of universality and, along with that, the quasi-theological claim that Wordsworth attached to it.

Even when we have understood it for what it is, Wordsworth's emphasis on universal or transcendental emotion remains strange. I think this is because what it actually proposes sounds to be much more like a new form of religion than what we expect from it – a successful poetic experiment. This of course is *one* of the explicit grounds on which Coleridge engaged it in the *second half* of the Biographia. The reason that Coleridge's argument does not seem clearer on this point, it seems to me, is because Coleridge refused to draw the distinction between religious language and ordinary language that Wordsworth was making (and that we too now habitually make) via an appeal to the *primacy* of feeling to

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<sup>125</sup> BL, XVII, 199.

<sup>126</sup> If space permitted, I could go into more detail about the role of the Imagination in Wordsworth's poetry. It has a much better documented role in Wordsworth's poetics than does the act of 'selection' he refers to here and the association of the act with failure of expectations has often been noted in that context. One of the more famous instances occurs in The Prelude when he learns that he has unwittingly crossed the summit of the Alps. This failure of his own prejudiced expectations could not be received more jubilantly or have greater significance attached to it:

Imagination!—lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my song  
 Like an unfathomed vapour, here that power,  
 In all the might of its endowments, came  
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,  
 Halted without a struggle to break through,  
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say  
 'I recognise thy glory'. In such strength  
 Of usurpation, in such visitings  
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense  
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us  
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
 There harbours whether we be young or old  
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home,  
 Is with infinitude—and only there;  
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
 And something ever more about to be. (VI, 525-542)

language. The connection of a theological argument with what is now also viewed as the separate fields of poetry and philosophy nevertheless is blatant throughout the course of the *Biographia*. They are held together by Coleridge's overtly Christian 'transcendental deduction' of the imagination at the end of the first half of the work.

As we have seen, there were significant reasons for Wordsworth to think that such a holistic remedy was in order, for such was the nature of the threat that had presented itself. His poetic effort worked on a practical level against the tendency he perceived to be at work in society to *normalise* people in a manner that left no room for the freedom of the will. For Wordsworth the feeling of intimacy – derived from 'natural sympathy' – was the remedy. To enter into an adequate discussion of the ways in which Wordsworth's poetics present a new form of Enlightened religion, it would of course require another thesis. Nonetheless, there are some observations that can be made that will guide the discussion and support this claim.

### *Religious language and the Romantic refraction of the Enlightenment*

These observations cannot be admitted as evidence of direct influence. Nonetheless, the analogies are too strong to be dismissed. I would first like to make these observations in relation to what the Romantics wrote and then expand the discussion to the hermeneutic issues of meaning. The first observation is that there is a politico-philosophical tract that appeared in Germany in 1796 that made explicit the attempt that we can see less formally expressed in the English Romantics. Often called 'Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus,' it proposed the need of a new form of religion and a new form of state, based on reason and 'the notion of my self as an absolutely free being.' The 'highest act of reason,' it proclaimed, was an 'aesthetic act' that would replace the acts of the priesthood. 'We must,' it says, 'have a new mythology, but this mythology must be in the service of the Ideas,' i.e. objects of freedom: 'it must become a mythology of reason.'<sup>127</sup> It seems to me to substantiate the view that Wordsworth (and, by an implication he resented, Coleridge) had created a system of poetry with similar such intentions when a contemporaneous movement with similar characteristics made such intentions explicit. Coleridge's apparent complicity with a project of such intentions may in fact partly explain his attack on Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria*. He wished to distinguish his own views on precisely such issues.

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted from Andrew Bowie's *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. Manchester: Man. U.P., 1990. *Appendix*, 265-66.

Secondly, there is the train of arguments that Gadamer makes about the character of Romanticism and its relation to the Enlightenment. He observes first of all that:

In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgement seat of reason. Thus the written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. We can know better: this is the maxim with which the modern Enlightenment approaches tradition and which ultimately leads it to undertake historical research. It takes tradition as an object of critique, just as the natural sciences do with the evidence of the senses. (T&M, 272)

Since prejudices must ultimately be justified by rational knowledge to be considered true, the Enlightenment and its 'prejudice against prejudice' work to 'determine the self-understanding of historicism' that appears latterly in the Romantic period. However that did not take place transparently. Nor can it be understood so.

For the process of that determination was made *indirectly* through the refraction that Romanticism effects upon the aims of the Enlightenment. The consonance (and dissonance) of Romanticism with the preceding movement can be seen in the philosophy of history it shares with the Enlightenment, which 'through the romantic reaction to (it) became an unshakeable premise: the schema of the conquest of mythos by logos.' Gadamer elaborates on what he means by this:

What gives this schema its validity is the presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world. It is supposed to represent progress in the history of the mind, and precisely because romanticism disparages this development, it takes over the schema itself as a self-evident truth. It shares the presupposition of the Enlightenment and only reverses its values, seeking to establish the validity of what is old simply on the fact that it is old: the 'gothic' Middle Ages, the Christian European community of states, the permanent structure of society, but also the simplicity of peasant life and closeness to nature. (273)

This explains the fact that rather than finding the Enlightenment's 'faith in perfection' as a 'complete freedom from 'superstition'' we find, he observes, a different emphasis in Romanticism: that all of these ancient things have acquired 'a romantic magic, even a priority over truth.' For Wordsworth, the magic is particularly associated with *natura naturans*, the foundation of what later becomes known as *Lebensphilosophie*.

Romanticism's paradoxical reversal of the aims of the Enlightenment and the tendency it follows 'to reconstruct the old because it is old, the conscious return to the unconscious, culminating in the recognition of the superior wisdom of the primeval age of myth' actually only perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason though. It takes the form that we see so characteristically in Wordsworth and his contemporaries' writing:

... the romantic reversal of the Enlightenment's criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason. All criticism of the Enlightenment now proceeds via this romantic mirror image of the Enlightenment. Belief in the perfectibility of reason suddenly changes into the perfection of the 'mythical' consciousness and finds itself reflected in a paradisaal primal state before the 'fall' of thought. (273-74)

The Romantics' conviction of this 'fall of thought' and commitment to an organicist view of nature, I have suggested, is expressed by their characteristic attempt to understand language and its socialised prejudices to attain this 'paradisaal, primal state' – connoted by the word silence. But it is almost shocking to recognise that Wordsworth's 'revolutionary' conviction that there was a sort of nonsensical *spiritual language* that lay behind and beyond the grasp of normal language, whose best analogy was to feeling, which could be most keenly perceived in emanations of reality and truth most closely tied to nature and 'selected' from the 'real language of men' was not entirely novel.

This is however the case. Both Robert Lowth and Hugh Blair, to name just two of the more prominent examples of the age, preceded him in it and both related this language to the sublime. This, I propose, instructs us how to understand Wordsworth's emphasis on transcendence and his use of silence – as an organicist's appropriation of the eighteenth century category of the sublime to reflect this 'paradisaal primal state.' Stephen Prickett suggests that to understand Wordsworth's familiar and at the same time odd linguistic associations and his adherence to the idea of a 'religious language' closest to 'common language' we must first look to these men and *their* associations of the *sublime* with the *sacred*.<sup>128</sup> They are short steps from the sacred to the sublime to the natural and to the simple. To select one moment of particular significance, we can look to Lowth's prose translation of passages widely acknowledged to be 'poetic' in the Old Testament. In his translation we note the ready currency (and associations) that had already been created for Wordsworth's sort of arguments. Lowth's translation of the Hebrew scriptures into language less 'poetic' in the traditional English sense seemed to confirm the idea that all meaning should be regarded 'historically' from a universal vantage or 'aspect more sublime.' Its universal sense could be best gleaned through 'feeling' divested of 'artificial language.'

Prickett notes that it was the acknowledged power of Lowth's *prose* translation of Hebrew poetry into English – based on his conviction that the Hebrew verse was 'simple and unadorned' and owed its 'almost ineffable sublimity' not to its elevated terms but rather to the depth and *universality* of its subject-matter – that provided Hugh Blair with the idea we now

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<sup>128</sup> Stephen Prickett. *Words and the Word*. (1986)

almost instinctively associate with Wordsworth and Coleridge, the idea that poetry 'is the language of passion, enlivened imagination.'<sup>129</sup> The consonance of the evidence of these previous writers' trains of thought with those we habitually designate Romantics of course also argues that Romanticism was not primarily a poetic movement at all. It is far better to see it as a 'spiritual movement' and one that can be closely allied to a form of Deism:

If the Enlightenment considers it an established fact that all tradition that reason shows to be impossible (i.e. nonsense) can only be understood historically – i.e. by going back to the past's way of looking at things – then the historical consciousness that emerges in romanticism involves a radicalisation of the Enlightenment. For nonsensical tradition, which had been the exception, has become the rule for historical consciousness. Meaning that is generally accessible through reason is so little believed that the whole of the past – even, ultimately, all the thinking of one's contemporaries – is understood only 'historically.' Thus the romantic critique of the Enlightenment itself ends in Enlightenment, for it evolves as historical science and draws everything into the orbit of historicism. The basic discrediting of all prejudices, which unites the experimental fervour of the new natural sciences during the Enlightenment, is universalised and radicalised in the historical Enlightenment. (275-76)<sup>130</sup>

This understanding of Romanticism as a historicising of the Enlightenment also holds true of how it treats the central point of its aesthetic, the point of absence. We can note this absence in the form of silence, the literary fragment, hyperbole, Romantic irony or any number of other tropes expressing absent points of origin in the poetry. What is expressed in these tropes of absent origin is the historicising (and organicising) of the Deist notion of God as transcendence perceived (and perhaps originating in feeling). By historicising it, they not only create what has been variously called 'the aesthetic of individuation' and 'the self-fathering tendency' in poetry, they make the meaning of human life and human history revolve around the history of an all-powerful *absence*. David Simpson comments;

Rather than admitting that we can never achieve certain knowledge of first principles, and then insisting on absolute coherence and closure between the parts of any system built upon those assumed first principles, Romantic aesthetics insists upon a recourse to emptiness, a re-founding in imperceptible beginnings, at every point of transition between the parts of its systems. The organic model itself, whilst appearing to introduce an indubitable continuity, yet locates that continuity at some level beyond or within what can be apprehended as phenomenal appearance; we can only wonder at the transition from seed to blossom.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Robert Lowth is commonly acknowledged as the originator of the so-called Higher Criticism in Biblical studies. His Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews were delivered first as the Oxford Poetry Lectures in 1741 before being published in Latin in 1753. They attained a wider degree of popularity with their translation into English in 1787, largely thanks to critics like Hugh Blair. The statement by Blair is from his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. (1820). II, 270-71.

<sup>130</sup> It is this same conviction however that prompted the great nineteenth century search for an 'original language' that underlay all existent languages and inspired the 'universal histories' that abounded at the time.

<sup>131</sup> David Simpson. Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry. (1981). 181.

The connection in Lowth's Lectures of the *universal* with the *natural* and of ancient, less socialised forms of religion with unadorned yet vitally powerful language only amounted to proof to a man like Wordsworth, who hated cities and particularly lamented their debasement of human sensibilities, that a means of righting that tendency lay in 'turning back' to the most universal and at the same time most innate feeling. The connection that writers such as Lowth and Blair had made in their observations of the writing of the ancients provided him with a means of uniting the universal with the natural with the intimate and with the true.

What Wordsworth based his whole poetics on, as M.H. Abrams has already observed with considerable force of argument and ample demonstrations (if too dualistically), was effectively an analogue of the Christian *kingdom of God*. In particular, it imitated the *relationships* involved in it, e.g. of believers to that kingdom and the relation of the Creator to his creatures and creation. In fact, Wordsworth could claim, even if with an entirely different emphasis, to be acting 'in the same spirit' as the original movement by converting the 'dead letter' to the more common currency of feeling. This new spirit of course had its consequences that on the surface seemed entirely happy with the Enlightenment's unambiguous emphasis on a highly ambiguous form of freedom and its 'prejudice against prejudice.' It brought the universality of salvation to the individual not only irrespective of his beliefs, his words and his deeds, it brought that salvation under the control of reason and made it entirely immanent in this world, 'where we find our happiness, or not at all.'

However, it was not as undifferentiated or unbiased as it appeared. It no longer brought judgement upon all (and saved some by imputing them righteousness for their belief), but it did condemn those who, like the urban dweller, had offended the sanctity of the human heart and its natural feelings. These, the sensual and unreflective, stood self-condemned through their lives in the 'sleep of Death.'<sup>132</sup> The comparison can be extended still further: in the former instance, although the salvation of that kingdom was open to all, Christ's sacrifice was revealed to and believed by those who are chosen by God and who respond to him. Wordsworth, on the other hand, enacted an analogue to this kingdom of salvation in the refracted, organic form of universality of a *kingdom of feeling*, revealed to and believed by those who are chosen by nature and who respond to it. The realm of this 'natural kingdom' was *universality* and it was associated with nature by the organic experience of the sublime. The language of this kingdom of feeling was quintessentially silence, in part because it was

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<sup>132</sup> 'Preface to the Excursion.' The Poems of Wordsworth. III, 60-61.

free of any hint of prejudice and in part because it most closely approximated the feeling of the organism.<sup>133</sup>

I am aware that this thesis profoundly contradicts at least two normal opinions. The first one, firmly entrenched at least since the time of the nineteenth-century historicists, is that society is a term that can be applied to human community across the ages – the modern forms of it being merely the sublimed product of characteristics that were present in germinal form throughout the ages. This opinion has long been supported by evolutionary theory and has led to metanarrative theses rooted in one of two altogether incompatible and mutually exclusive directions: either that the source of infinite complexity and diversity of matter and life can be attributed to something infinitely vast ‘out there,’ (reflected in its ‘Big bang theory’) or to something infinitely small within us, i.e. what has been called the ‘selfish gene.’ These are derivations of the terms of Romantic aesthetics and its ‘organic model,’ which, as Simpson noted, ‘whilst appearing to introduce an indubitable continuity’ by a reference to history, ‘yet locates that continuity at some level beyond or within what can be apprehended as phenomenal appearance’ leaving us in fact with utter uncertainty: ‘we can only wonder at the transition from seed to blossom.’<sup>134</sup>

The second is the perception that worship had always been inexpressible when it was its most sincere and that the Romantics’ organicist emphasis is therefore not entirely unorthodox. This relates to the notion of the inexpressible ‘religious impulse’ of ‘feeling.’ But, as Prickett points out, the belief that there was in fact such a thing as ‘religious language,’ which can be seen to underlie this view (its correspondent terms), was altogether unprecedented prior to the modern obsession with the sublime:

The notion that the actual words used to talk about religious experience should be seen as constituting a historical or epistemological problem of a special or even unique kind is rather less than three hundred years old. There always have been, it is true, philosophers and theologians who have tended to view language per se as a somewhat sloppy and ineffective medium for precise communication.... None of these authorities, however, was inclined to view the language used to describe religious experience as presenting a special case – a different order of problem from the perennial one of ‘words and things’ as a whole. Such a suspicion was scarcely voiced before the beginning of the eighteenth century, and then was voiced, not as one might expect in connection with the peculiar problems raised by biblical narratives, but in relation to the current critical passion for classification of literary kinds.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>133</sup> It can only be speculated whether this perception lay behind the German poet Hölderlin’s retreat into silence later in life, but it is plausible given the many similarities he shared with Wordsworth.

<sup>134</sup> David Simpson. *op. cit.* (1979). 181.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen Prickett. *op. cit.* (1986). 37-38.

*Coleridge's hermeneutic response to Wordsworth in the Biographia Literaria (1817): the Imagination*

At this point, it will probably be useful to refer directly to Coleridge's hermeneutic disagreement with Wordsworth as expressed in the Biographia Literaria rather than simply alluding to it. All of the observations that have been made about the logical difficulties of Wordsworth's organicist theory incline one to agree with P.W.K. Stone's assessment of Romantic poetics that 'at first sight (there is) no organising *principle* on which to collate and classify the mass of disorganised, heterogeneous material.'<sup>136</sup> There does appear to be some hope though in so far as most of these concerns and difficulties are encapsulated in what Stone describes as the characteristic Romantic concept, the 'feeling-thought of Imagination.' The imagination is indeed well recognised as the defining concept of the period. For example, The Oxford Companion to English Literature (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) refers to it at the culmination of its definition of Romanticism, which it describes as:

... a literary movement, and profound shift in sensibility, which took place in Britain and throughout Europe roughly between 1770 and 1848. Intellectually it marked a violent reaction to the Enlightenment. Politically it was inspired by the revolutions of America and France... Emotionally it expressed an extreme assertion of the self and the value of individual experience... together with the sense of the infinite and the transcendental. Socially it championed progressive causes... The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is intensity, and its watchword is 'Imagination.' (842-43)

Unfortunately, the import attributed to the Imagination differs amongst the poets, and never more markedly than between the two main architects of the movement in England. Indeed, the Biographia Literaria demonstrates in both its form and its content that Coleridge regarded the role and significance of the imagination as the primary bone of contention between himself and Wordsworth.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>136</sup> P.W.K. Stone. The Art of Poetry 1750-1820. (1967). 107.

<sup>137</sup> The apparent gap between the two halves of the Biographia and the failed transcendental deduction has been approached by critics in various ways. There seem to be three main stances that have been taken:

i) to admit the problems, yet see them as aberrations which need not belie tendencies which are otherwise valid for the Biographia and Coleridge's work as a whole. Of these approaches, Thomas McFarland Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition. (1969) offers the best critique. ii) to deny the problems, seeing even the apparent 'gaps' in the argument as nothing of the sort but rather as an aspect of a philosophical stance of incompleteness which challenge the reader to 'complete (them) with the recognisable substance of his or her own theory.' (Hamilton. Coleridge's Poetics. 14). Of these approaches, Kathleen Wheeler (Sources, Processes, Methods in Coleridge's Biographia. (1981)) appears to offer the most convincing argument, though James C. McKusick's excellent account in (Coleridge's Philosophy of Language. (1986)) tends in that direction as well. iii) to admit the problems and attempt to account for them. This is the approach adopted by Paul Hamilton (Coleridge's Poetics. (1983)), whereby the gaps and subsequently the composition of the text itself are seen as being influenced by factors extraneous to the text.



It seems to me that it was not the weaknesses of Wordsworth's argument caused by his confessed lack of familiarity (at least in terms of first-hand knowledge) with Kant that Coleridge found so objectionable. It was his organicist explanation of nature and of the workings of human creativity as a 'natural' process. This claim was implicit in Wordsworth's appeal to the superiority of a life in communion with nature, the imaginative gifts he claimed to be its natural outgrowth and its correspondingly naïve hermeneutics appealing to that nature, which were afforded to him through the act he called 'selection.'

In attacking Wordsworth on these terms, Coleridge was, as has so often been noted, also at odds with his other contemporaries, though the reason for that has remained opaque to most critics.<sup>138</sup> What I propose to do is to lead up to Coleridge's notion of Imagination as it is expressed in the *Biographia*. This will take place in Coleridge's terms (to some extent) since he is the most cogent theorist, but not without making some observations that link in with the previous discussion of the universal hermeneutic claim of Romanticism and the resultant place of the *aporia* in thinking. The difference in his treatment of the same issues lies, as was mentioned earlier in the chapter, in what Coleridge *means* when he says that 'the best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflections on the acts of the mind itself.' It is clear from Coleridge's arguments that Wordsworth was thoroughly misguided in claiming to use the 'natural' language of rustics in his poetry – as if their language was not a tool that had been sharpened through centuries of cultivation. Coleridge demonstrates the absurdity of that position quite forcibly. What is also clear though is that that is not really what Wordsworth's *poetry* evinces anyway. What it does evince, he maintains (and objects to equally), is an organicist notion of universality that claims the emotional range and the superficial connotations of a Christian framework, while denying the idea of Divine agency in forming it. In other words, he objects that Wordsworth and the advocates of this theory argue

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<sup>138</sup> It led M.H. Abrams, in his widely influential book *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), to the thesis analogous to a distinction between religious language and acts of language. He puts it more formally as the distinctions between 'a poem as a poem, and on a poem as a process of mind.' This explanation is out of tune with the emphasis of the *Biographia* (and the rest of Coleridge's work for that matter), particularly because Abrams fails to acknowledge that it was Wordsworth's natural organicism that was the central problem for Coleridge, not his solution to Wordsworth's terms:

It was above all in his exploitation of this new aesthetics of organicism that Coleridge, more thoroughly than Wordsworth, was the innovative English critic of his time. At the same time, it was, paradoxically, because he retained a large part of the neo-classic critical tenets and terms which Wordsworth minimized or rejected that Coleridge's criticism is much more flexible and practicable – more adequate to the illumination of a great diversity of specific poems – than Wordsworth's. The logical manoeuvre by which Coleridge managed this feat, though sharply differentiating 'poetry' from a 'poem,' is awkward, and has certainly led to a wide misunderstanding of his intention. But by it, he was enabled to maintain a double view, capable alternately of dwelling on a poem as a poem, and on a poem as a process of mind.

(124)

as if the connotations their own language evoked bore no traces of *determination* by their own tradition and only expressed the 'spontaneous' natural feeling of the human organism.

Coleridge maintains the contrary. Neither does the formation of these reflections stem from the act of transcendental introspection per se nor to the organic act of 'selection' as Wordsworth explains it, i.e. as a demonstration of the self-originating and self-legitimizing power of the act of thought to (re)create from the ground of the absolutely negative. Instead he refers to the 'selection' of divine symbols and use of the linguistic framework that had already been provided by the revelation of the Divine agent and subsequent religious instruction. The best part of human language for Coleridge, while 'derived from reflections on the acts of the mind upon itself,' attributes those reflections to the distinctions that were *primarily* bestowed through divine revelation in history. This revelation functions as what Gadamer calls a 'prejudice,' which is not attributable to *nature* nor even to social convention, but rather to divine revelation about *human nature*, a revelation that has gradually been disseminated and adopted as a general truth. This is a persistent train of thought for Coleridge. What he asserts is that this general truth, which has been delineated by Kant in terms of 'pure reason' now allows for miraculous insights.

Nonetheless, this insight becomes itself a powerful delusion when it is divested of the metanarrative of salvation history. Thus he writes in The Statesman's Manual:

In the infancy of the world, signs and wonders were requisite in order to startle and break down that superstition, idolatrous in itself and the source of all other idolatry, which tempts the natural man to seek the true cause and origin of public calamities in outward circumstances, persons and incidents... But with each miracle worked there was a truth revealed, which thenceforward was to act as its substitute: and if we think the Bible less applicable to us on account of the miracles, we degrade ourselves into mere slaves of sense and fancy, which are indeed the appointed medium between earth and heaven, but for that very cause stand in a desirable relation to spiritual truth then only, when, as a mere and passive medium, they yield a free passage to its light.<sup>139</sup>

It is in this sense that Coleridge writes in the Biographia that the best part of human language:

...is formed by a *voluntary* appropriation of *fixed symbols* to internal acts, to *processes and results of imagination*, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilised society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed or reaped.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> The Statesman's Manual (1905). 310-11.

<sup>140</sup> BL, XVII, 197. (my italics)

Coleridge traces this inculcation of the common sense of propriety and 'innate' sense of liberty in the English people to the Reformation, which transferred the learning of the schools through the pulpit into 'the phrases in hourly currency among our peasants.' The fact that these senses are not truly innate, but rather the legacy of the determinations of the Christian faith that now *seem natural* to us, he proposes is demonstrated by the very obstacles that missionaries have found 'of finding words for the simplest moral and intellectual processes in the languages of uncivilised tribes.' (197). That peasants therefore speak a universal language of nature, Coleridge states quite firmly, is an urban myth.

### *Paul de Man on symbol and allegory*

Although it is somewhat of a diversion from the argument, it seems to me necessary to address the charge that Coleridge also appealed to the same organic sense of universality in exalting thought-feeling as poetry, particularly in his concept of the symbol (and therefore of the imagination). For if the Romantics' historicised and organicised sense of universality leads invariably to the hermeneutic *aporia* that has so vexed contemporary interpretative practices, as we have seen that Gadamer has argued, then if Coleridge merely presents an instance of the same organicism, his theory of poetics offers no escape from it. What I am suggesting however is that Coleridge effectively presents an argument akin to Arendt's, emphasising the necessities of the *meaningful prejudices* of Christian theology for the 'just distinctions' of philosophy and true poetry.

But a far more alarming possibility than one that categorises Coleridge as a Kantian has presented itself in the deconstructionist school of criticism in recent years. It has emerged precisely because it understands Coleridge to be making a universalist type of argument. In a well-known and influential essay, Paul de Man claimed that Coleridge's concept of the symbol was nothing but a form of allegory that had pretensions to a metaphysical claim. De Man's essay alleged that Coleridge's concept of the symbol fell into the same sort of abyss that Wordsworth's poetic efforts had, that of the self-referential play of the mind with itself, because it made no connection to a greater truth-claim than that of 'experience.'<sup>141</sup> His allegation strangely takes us to the very heart of the matter in Coleridge's account. Gadamer has noted (and I too have argued) that the organicist valorisation of the symbol at the expense of the allegory in the Romantic period is 'the product of an aesthetics that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience.'<sup>142</sup> This tendency to

<sup>141</sup> Paul de Man. 'The Rhetoric of Temporality.' *Blindness and Insight*. (1983). 187-228.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.* 188.

blur the distinction between experience and its representation holds true for much of Coleridge's own poetry too; indeed the poetry of the entire age suffers from what Arnold described to be characteristic of Shelley, namely ineffectuality. A poetics based around the symbol, which has informed the New Critical practice of reading poetry as an 'organic work' with a special integrity, is all too often a poetics of affect, not effect.

Nonetheless, it is questionable whether that fact can lead us to regard *all* uses of the symbol as having the same intention and obeying the same universal logic. De Man and most Anglo-American critics assume that Coleridge's use of the word symbol is tantamount to a proof of the same and they point to his wide reading of German philosophy as their historical evidence. They are supported in their view of Coleridge by the fact that he himself borrows extensively from the German philosophers leading directly up to his key definition of the Imagination in Book 13 of the *Biographia* and even often expresses himself in comparable terms.<sup>143</sup> This leads them to assert that Coleridge's definition is basically synonymous with that of his contemporaries, particularly Wordsworth, even if his distinctions are more carefully expressed (and, above all, more Kantian). My contention is that although Coleridge does indeed seize on the compatibility of aspects of these writers' work with his own, it does not warrant such a strict association.

The evidence must be scrutinised carefully. It is beyond dispute that both Wordsworth and Coleridge operated within the same tradition, reacted to a similar context and employed similar terminology. What is eminently debatable though is whether they both are susceptible to the purely 'allegorical' model of reading language that the deconstructionist Paul de Man applies to them; and in particular, whether he can attack Coleridge's idea of the symbol as a mere obfuscation of arguments that are as susceptible to deconstruction as those of his contemporaries are. If that is the case, then the *aporia* would be as much a part of Coleridge's notion of the symbol as it is of his contemporaries' Romantic hermeneutics. It is my primary intent here to demonstrate that Coleridge's *intention* (and the reasons he chose to express it as he did) is different than others have represented it. The merits of his argument, i.e. whether he succeeded in presenting the true prejudices that exonerate him from charge of presenting a universalist argument, I leave for the reader to judge himself. Coleridge's objection to Wordsworth in the *Biographia* alone seems evidence that he perceived there to be

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<sup>143</sup> It is of course worth noting that Coleridge never makes his promised 'transcendental deduction.' I think that this is because he cannot and will not. Instead, he presents what amounts to a dogmatic assertion, which, given the expectation raised, must amount to what he had described as *making a bull*. As he describes it in the fourth chapter of the *Biographia*, 'the bull namely consists in the bringing together two incompatible thoughts, with the sensation, but without the sense, of their connection.' (43)

a fundamental divergence in intention between himself and Wordsworth that needed to be made clear.

Judging from the history of the reception of the *Biographia*, it does not seem that he was wholly successful. In fact, quite the opposite seems to have resulted. Coleridge's theory has been mistaken by the critical tradition as an extension of German literary theory, which, because of its essential compatibility with Wordsworth's poetics, has rendered his own philosophical distinctions questionable and his theological additions superfluous. His practical criticism has been roundly praised, but his philosophical and particularly his theological arguments have largely been ignored or mistaken. I suspect that this reception owes itself as much to the accident of history that placed him in a country initially hostile to German philosophy – requiring him to present and defend more vigorously arguments that in a different context he might have been more wary of doing – but thereafter in general agreement with it. Coleridge's own exuberant association of his work with the work of contemporary German philosophy, an exuberance that extended to the point of plagiarism, has also conspired against him in making those differences known. It ought perhaps to be read in the hostile context in which it was written rather than in the receptive context of its appropriation, which, as I argued at the outset of the chapter, has understood the value in the German philosophical tradition in a way Coleridge did not. This would go a long way towards explaining the incompatibilities that are apparent between Coleridge and the thinkers he so eagerly though not <sup>un</sup>equivocally affiliated himself to at the time. He somewhat overstated this strong affiliation, and most importantly did so at the most important point in his best read critical work. The evidence indeed weighs heavily against the possibility of ever extricating Coleridge from their shadows, or Wordsworth's form of Romanticism. Coleridge seems to be vindictive and petty in attacking his friend's poetic theory.

Be that as it may, it seems to me that Coleridge's symbol is primarily used, unlike his German contemporaries and fellow English Romantics, as a means of holding onto the traditional Christian theological intention of the allegory, which had been impoverished as a trope by the Enlightenment's application of the 'prejudice against prejudice.'<sup>144</sup> In using the concept of the symbol, Coleridge thought, by contrast, that he was giving it a *determination* that allowed it to escape being implicated with this 'unenlivened generalising understanding,' which he and his contemporaries obviously thought the concept of the allegory had been. This implication was as much of a threat in universalist thought as in materialist thought if

both were ultimately related to the terms of life-experience. Gadamer writes in re-assessing this valorisation of the symbol:

Nineteenth century aesthetics was founded on the freedom of the symbolising power of the mind. But is that a sufficient foundation? Is not this symbolising activity also in fact limited by the continued existence of a mythical, allegorical tradition? Once this is recognised, however, the contrast between the symbol and allegory again becomes relative, whereas the prejudice of the aesthetics of *Erlebnis* made it appear absolute. Likewise, the difference between aesthetic consciousness and mythical consciousness can hardly be considered absolute.<sup>145</sup>

Most certainly Gadamer has a point in this. Indeed I believe that Coleridge would have agreed with him that life-experience per se is not a possible ground for truth. For despite the strength of his advocacy of the symbol (which seems to ally him to the tendency that arose in the nineteenth century around the aesthetics of *Erlebnis*), Coleridge's intention had been none other than to lay claim to the ground to which the old use of allegory had pointed. His use of the symbol certainly appealed to life-experience, but it could not be reduced to it. He argued the 'continued existence' of a tradition that had been inculcated by the teaching of the Bible. The truth he thought it contained had nothing *per se* to do with symbolic or allegorical depiction. They were means to an end. The whole debate that has sprung up to be primarily about distinctive or 'religious language,' whether symbolic or allegorical, which Gadamer appears to open up again, was secondary to him. His use of the symbol was thoroughly Christian in intent and he adopted the concept of the symbol because it lay claim to both the literal and metaphorical.

So as not to overstate the point here, I think that what de Man observes in the Romantics' concept of the symbol and in its fairly unequivocal valorisation in the 'organic work' by contemporary critics such as Abrams and Wasserman is largely correct.<sup>146</sup> The

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<sup>144</sup> Coleridge's dismisses the 'prejudice against prejudice' that Gadamer has noted to be characteristic of Kant and the Enlightenment as the product of an 'unenlivened generalising understanding.' I think it more correctly understood as an unenlivened *universalising* understanding.

<sup>145</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer. *T&M*, 81.

<sup>146</sup> De Man points out one particularly notable exception to the widespread adoption of the symbol in the German tradition as an example of the complexity of the intellectual climate of the debate between symbol and allegory, Hamann's polemic against Herder. He notes of that polemic:

In the perspective of traditional German classicism, allegory appears as the product of the age of Enlightenment and is vulnerable to the reproach of excessive rationality. Other trends, however, consider allegory as the very *place* where the contact with a *superhuman origin of language* has been preserved. (189, my italics)

He notes that Hamann, quite against the tendency of the age, mounts his attack on Herder's 'natural' explanation of the origin of language on the basis of the 'allegorical nature of all language.' Three comments are worth making here about de Man's reduction of the symbolic/ allegorical debate to be a linguistic dispute of the first order: Firstly, I object to de Man's nonsensical use of the word allegory here. *Allegory* cannot be considered as a *place* other than figuratively, in which case the object of its figuration ought to be named. As it stands it is a figurative reference to a figure of speech, which he probably intends to refer to a place of *absence* that is 'contacted.' The *traditional use* of allegory on

symbol cannot be regarded as a generic solution to the supposed generic problem of metaphorical diction. He is correct in questioning 'the supremacy of the symbol' 'as the basis of recent French and English studies of the romantic and post-romantic eras, to such an extent that allegory is frequently considered an anachronism and dismissed as non-poetic.'<sup>147</sup> Such a sense of the symbol owes itself to a mistaken notion of religious language that de Man quite rightly suspects, though it is also true of a model of thinking without true prejudices that he himself adopts. Where I think he lapses into error however is by not differentiating Coleridge's use of the symbol (and therefore his use of the imagination) from that of the other Romantics. This leads him to attack Coleridge on the basis of a position he does not espouse. This mistake is particularly puzzling since de Man admits that the problem with the symbol may actually have originated with the critics:<sup>148</sup>

Wasserman's claim for Coleridge as the reconciler of what he calls 'the phenomenal world of understanding with the noumenal world of reason' is based on a quotation in which Coleridge simply substitutes another self for the category of the object and thus removes the problem from nature altogether, reducing it to a purely intersubjective pattern. 'To make the object one with us, we must become one with the object — ergo, an object. Ergo, the object must itself a subject — partially a favourite dog, principally a friend, wholly God, *the Friend*.' Wordsworth was never guilty of thus reducing a theocentric to an interpersonal relationship.<sup>149</sup>

What de Man observes here is true on one level – the ironic. What he describes Wordsworth as never having been 'guilty of' was precisely the substance of Coleridge's accusations in the Biographia – that Wordsworth's Preface not only made no sense, but had abstracted all personal and logocentric character from God. De Man's insight reveals his very blindness to that. Moreover, what he refers to as theocentric here seems to me to be in keeping with

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the other hand reflects the perceived inadequacy of language to fully grasp its object (or, if you will, the blasphemy of trying to make it subject to cognition) by naming it directly. Secondly, de Man somewhat clumsily conflates the Judaeo-Christian account of language with those of an Enlightenment understanding of Greek mythology by referring to the *superhuman origin* of language as if language were something *superadded* to man *after creation*. The account in Genesis however stresses that God is a being who speaks and brings everything that *is* into being by the power of his words, thereby also marking his mastery over it; similarly mankind speaks and relates to the world through language *as an intrinsic part* of being made *in imago Dei*. Thirdly, Hamann's traditional sense of the word allegory was becoming obsolete. As such, the point de Man is making here is purely pedantic. The allegory was replaced by the concept of the symbol, though not usually with the intent Hamann had had for allegory. Its function was *usually* appropriated by the writers of the age for the wholly secular intention of what Gadamer calls *Erlebniskunst*, i.e. which Abrams describes as Romanticism's characteristic 'natural supernaturalism.' The organic common sense that has developed on the symbol is however not Coleridge's, but that of his fellow Romantics. It contains the *aporia*.

<sup>147</sup> De Man. op. cit. 190.

<sup>148</sup> He cites the tendency of later English and American criticism to misunderstand in the symbol a dialectic of subject and object, 'in which the experience of the object takes on the form of a perception or a sensation. The ultimate aim of the image is not, however, as in Coleridge, translucence, but synthesis, and the mode of this synthesis is defined as 'symbolic' by the priority conferred on the initial moment of sensory perception.' (193). That critical tendency is one of pure associationism and he rightly dismisses its claims to 'transcendence.'

<sup>149</sup> De Man. op. cit. 198.

Wasserman's (and Wordsworth's) own conflation of metaphysics with theology. His sense of theocentricity is more universalist and impersonal than *theocentric*, except in the Deist sense of that word. It is wholly abstracted from any sense of the formative power of the acts of God in the world. The 'intersubjective pattern' that de Man pronounces Coleridge 'guilty of' is in keeping with the distinction between Christian theology, which is centred upon the God who became incarnate and died as an atoning sacrifice for sin 'once for all,' and metaphysics, for which the formative influence of history lies outside consideration. The two realms certainly do to an extent overlap, but they are not co-extensive.

This distinction between what Coleridge meant and what de Man and others have mistaken him to have meant becomes clearer in de Man's discussion of Coleridge's famous distinction between the symbol and the allegory in The Statesman's Manual. De Man's intent is to discredit any sense of 'real presence' in language that Coleridge, it is said, attributes to his universalist argument. Coleridge initially presents, de Man notes, what appears to be 'an unqualified assertion of the symbol over the allegory'<sup>150</sup> in full harmony with what Gadamer characterises as the broader Romantic tendency of *Erlebniskunst* to signify 'art that comes from experience and is an expression of experience' and more derivatively, 'that is intended to be aesthetically experienced.'<sup>151</sup> In consonance with this broader tendency Coleridge says, for example, that in the life of the symbol, life and form are identical: 'such as the life is, such is the form.'<sup>152</sup> These assertions taken on their own suggest that in the symbol 'no disjunction of the constitutive faculties takes place, since the material perception and the symbolic imagination are continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole.'<sup>153</sup> By way of contrast, the allegory as he presents it is 'but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot.'<sup>154</sup> The difference between symbol and allegory appears so far to be clear and distinct.

However, says de Man, these distinctions are then confused by Coleridge in The Statesman's Manual. For there, rather than emphasising the organic or material richness of the symbol – as we might have expected given his association of 'the essential thinness of the

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.* 190.

<sup>151</sup> Gadamer. T&M, 70. It may be in the 'intention to be aesthetically experienced,' which Gadamer rightly notes as a contemporaneous and not entirely equivalent phenomenon, that we can note the beginning of the concept of a separate 'religious language' of 'real presence' referred to earlier.

<sup>152</sup> S.T. Coleridge. Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists. (1907). 46.

<sup>153</sup> De Man. op. cit. 191.



allegory with a lack of substantiality' – Coleridge praises above all the symbol's 'translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal.' This is all too much for de Man:

The material substantiality dissolves and becomes a mere reflection of a more original unity that does not exist in the material world. It is all the more surprising to see Coleridge, in the final part of the passage, characterize allegory negatively as being *merely* a reflection. In truth, the spiritualization of the symbol has been carried so far that the moment of material existence by which it was originally defined has now become altogether unimportant; symbol and allegory alike now have a common origin beyond the world of matter. The reference, in both cases, to a transcendental source, is now more important than the kind of relationship that exists between reflection and its source. (192)

De Man chief complaint, we note, is that Coleridge's notion of symbolic language has abandoned the characteristic traits of 'religious language,' i.e. an adherence to certain magical words as if they contained 'presence.' Coleridge makes no claims to greater ontological value for his symbolic language in and of itself. De Man concludes that the difference between the symbol and the allegory 'is a pure decision of the mind.'

It might be useful at this point to cite the passage in The Statesman's Manual that de Man refers to at greater length, firstly, because it usually is cited out of context (as is the case here) and, secondly, because there, significantly, the imagination and the fancy are also prominent in it. It is important to see Coleridge's distinction between the symbol and the allegory in the context of a comparison that he had just made. He commented on the distinction between universalising forms of philosophy and the truths of the Bible, primarily in terms of how the latter works organically, by means of 'educts' through which truths flow and take their form:

The histories and political economy of the present and preceding century partake in the general contagion of its mechanic philosophy, and are the product of an *unenlivened generalizing understanding*. In the Scriptures they are the *living educts of the imagination*; of that reconciling and mediatory power, which *incorporating the reason in images of the sense*, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of *symbols*, harmonious in themselves, and *consubstantial* with the truths of which they are the conductors. (321, my italics)

Symbolic language has ontological value, not because the words are 'magical,' we note, but rather because they are consubstantial, i.e. because the truths to which they attest have that predicate.<sup>155</sup> This truth can make them 'true prejudices,' not the language itself.

<sup>154</sup> S.T. Coleridge. The Statesman's Manual. (1905). 322.

<sup>155</sup> Coleridge chooses the word 'consubstantial' carefully; if he had wanted to assert what de Man alleges, he would have said 'transubstantial.' It is an important theological term, dividing a Protestant from a Roman Catholic view on the sacraments. Cf. Zechariah 4 for a possible source of this image of 'living educts.'

Having made this comparison of the two and having attributed the difference between them to the symbol's ability to convey 'life,' the work of the 'reconciling and mediatory power' of the imagination, Coleridge goes on to assert the consequences of the failure to accept *both* the literal and the metaphorical sense of Scripture:

A hunger-bitten and idealess philosophy naturally produces a starveling and comfortless religion. It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognises *no medium* between literal and metaphorical. Faith is either to be buried in the *dead letter*, or its name and honours usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds *symbols* with *allegories*. Now an *allegory* is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; both alike insubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a *symbol*... is characterised by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the especial, or of the universal in the general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is the representative. The others are but empty echoes which the fancy arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter, less beautiful but not less shadowy than the sloping orchard or hill-side pasture-field seen in the transparent lake below.(322)

We can see that Coleridge has not attacked allegory because it refers to the here and now of sense perception, but rather because that is the *only* reference it is making. The abstraction from that is therefore mere pretension. In a *figurative* (though, he would argue, entirely real) *sense*, he says that allegory thus leads to an 'insubstantial and shapeless' form of understanding, and an illusory notion of the world and of God. Allegory smacks too much of associationist psychology, which itself denies the pre-formative role of a language (in which *historical acts*, the best part of language, as well as sensible observations are captured) in informing thinking. Coleridge is not referring here to a 'transcendent source' – that is the pure Deism 'without history or divine acts' that misinforms de Man's own understanding of Coleridge's reference to God. Such is indeed 'a starveling and comfortless,' as well as a nonsensical religion, but that is clearly *not* what Coleridge is saying here with reference to the symbol. The irony of what Coleridge wrote in attacking the use of the allegory however is that it could also be applied to the use of the symbol by the writers appealing to the veracity of *Erlebnis* or 'feeling.' Their use of the symbol, Coleridge might argue, was allegorical.

### *The Imagination in the Biographia Literaria*

What I propose that the Biographia primarily demonstrates is Coleridge's repeated effort to bring poetics and literary theory into harmony with Christian doctrine from whence, he implies, comes the *meaningful* and true prejudicial terms of right reason and

understanding. For the 'truth is its own light and evidence, discovering at once itself and falsehood...' (BL, XVIII, 218) The conviction of these true prejudices leads him to try to persuade the reader of the inadequacies of the philosophy that Wordsworth (and many of the philosophers he examined in the first half of the work) recommended – Cartesian forms of universality and their 'lifeless and godless' dualism.<sup>156</sup> Wordsworth's is a difficult argument for Coleridge to contend with precisely because it tends to propose conclusions similar to his own, i.e. that there was a unity that transcended all forms of appearance, which kept 'the heart alive in the head' and enabled a correspondence between the mind and nature. This unity, both poets believed, was one that could be symbolised in art. Nonetheless, a problem presents itself for Coleridge in so far as this unity appears to relate the natural quite transparently to the universal without any sense of distinction between them. It seems to me that Coleridge distinguishes himself from Wordsworth by proposing *different concepts* of nature and of the universal in the Biographia.

To follow Coleridge's train of thought in it we must acknowledge the ground wherein he saw the abiding unity within its broad range of material to lie, in the unifying vision of the Bible. This contained within it the fundamental notion of agency that his contemporaries' appeal to 'organic' experience denied. As he states not six months previously:

...the words of the apostle are literally and philosophically true: We (that is the human race) live by faith. Whatever we do or know, that in kind is different from the brute creation, has its origin in a determination of the reason to have faith and trust in itself. This, its first act of faith is scarcely less than identical with its own being. *Implicité*, it is the copula – it contains the possibility – of every position, to which there exists any correspondence *in reality*... The primal act of faith is enunciated in the word, GOD: a faith not derived from experience, but its ground and source, and without which the fleeting chaos of facts would no more from experience, than the dust of the grave can of itself make a living man. The imperative and oracular form of the inspired Scripture is *the form of reason itself* in all things purely rational and moral.<sup>157</sup>

Coleridge's association of reality and the 'form of reason itself' with the truth of *revelation* explains his unusual sense of universality 'in all things rational and moral.' It also helps us understand his objection to Wordsworth's claim to take 'a selection of the *real* language of men in a state of vivid sensation.' For he understands the *reality* to lie not in the testimony of subjective experience, which can be contradictory and illusory, but in the *formal* prejudices instilled by Holy Scripture that are the ground and source of *interpreting* and *understanding*

<sup>156</sup> Thomas McFarland, in his Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition (1970), interprets this as part of Coleridge's effort to avoid the dangers of pantheism, but I think it probably more accurate to see it as an effort to promote *monotheism* against the twin extremes of seeing God everywhere (pantheism) and seeing him nowhere (Deism). By this I do not mean to question that Coleridge was not Trinitarian, but rather that that was not the front on which he was fighting.

<sup>157</sup> The Statesman's Manual. 315. (my italics)

that subjective experience truthfully (and meaningfully), discovering at once itself and falsehood.

His own form of 'high argument' is however not a 'religious discussion' that can be sundered from the philosophical and poetic issues in the *Biographia*. Nor is it merely appended to the end of both halves of that work.<sup>158</sup> To understand it in either of these ways is to make a distinction between normal and religious language that Coleridge firmly resisted, as I have already argued. It fails to acknowledge that the vast range of material in the *Biographia* constitutes a proof of his refusal to see the intellectual issues he dealt with heterogeneously or in a compartmental manner. This does not demonstrate the *identity* of this *reality* or its arguments with the proofs of the senses or of other forms of arguments he provides. As he points out, 'things identical must be convertible.'<sup>159</sup> It demonstrates rather that he was seeking 'a total and undivided philosophy,' in which 'philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become inclusive of philosophy.'<sup>160</sup> And that was the basis of the arguments he made throughout the *Biographia*. Nonetheless, this goal of unity did not lead him to obviate all forms of difference by taking a 'universal perspective' on ontology of the sort characteristic of Descartes and the rationalists. He did not reintroduce 'the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence and the body as matter.'<sup>161</sup> The philosophical distinctions he made had neither the prejudice of universality *against* all prejudices, nor did they base themselves on the organicist appropriation of the sublime's aesthetic of individuation, an aesthetic of absent delimitation (which may have played a greater role in the compartmentalisation of specialist knowledge than has ever been acknowledged). His distinctions still had an important sense of difference to them.

Despite appearances, Coleridge's belief that he could achieve an 'equatorial point' between making 'just distinctions' and presenting a unifying vision was based on the fact that he did *not* even propose to investigate 'an absolute *principium essendi*.' He admits that

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<sup>158</sup> The editors to the two volume edition of the *Biographia*, while unfortunately implying a separation of different types of language (and argument) in the work – they see it as part of Coleridge's attempt to 'find an anchorage for his philosophy in the bottomless sea of faith' – nonetheless make a helpful retort to the critics who have argued that the work as a whole lacks unity:

The development of the philosophical chapters, from materialism and associationism to transcendentalism ends – as Coleridge thought it should – with God. No matter in what order he wrote the *Biographia*, he arranged that the philosophy of its first volume concludes with divinity, just as the second volume builds to a crescendo in Chapter 24, with the proclamation of Christ and of God the Father, the same 'great I AM' of theses VI and IX. (*Editors' Introduction*. lxxiii)

<sup>159</sup> *BL*, XVIII, 205. He offers a typically colourful and appropriate example of what he means: 'An idealist defending his system by the fact that when asleep we often believe ourselves awake, was well answered by his plain neighbour, 'Ah! but when awake do we ever believe ourselves asleep?'

<sup>160</sup> *BL*, XII, 154.

would have opened it to many valid objections. Rather, it was based on the attempt to investigate 'an absolute *principium cognoscendi*.'<sup>162</sup> This differentiated what he attempted from what Wordsworth proposed, because it meant that *he* was not thereby following Descartes' ontological and 'fanciful hypothesis of *material idea*, or certain configurations of the brain, which were as so many moulds to the influxes of the external world'<sup>163</sup> – as Wordsworth's nature and the experiential 'language' he claimed to derive from it was. The principle of knowledge he sought was one that would not work like a principle of origination by virtue of its *pure* and 'unprejudiced' self-referentiality, which Wordsworth had called the act of 'selection.' Coleridge did not move from an organicised void as did most of his contemporaries, from 'the profounder thought that in the *negative as such* there lies the ground of becoming, of the unrest of self-movement.'<sup>164</sup>

Instead he took the Divine act of creation as a given, as the ground of the very possibility for human creativity. And because he took the creation of mankind in God's image as axiomatic, he took the act of divine self-revelation (which, unlike human self-revelation through actions, carried within it the power of actuality that men only possessed, except through its imitation, in potentiality) as a paradigm for the human power of imagination to reconcile the self and nature as intimations of the second coming of Christ. This resemblance of the human to the divine did not impinge on his idea of *creativity* in the least; or, if it did, then it only did so in so far as it compassed it within the bounds of what Newton and Kant had demonstrated men's minds could explore through the use of reason.<sup>165</sup> For if a man repeated the acts of the Creator, *then* he was creative – otherwise he merely employed the arbitrary, sensual relations of what Coleridge called the *fancy*. Nor did this rational capacity for universal thinking lead Coleridge to conclude that mankind (or the world for that matter) was any less a created being; on the contrary, man's capacity to think universally (as Arendt argued Kant's idea of *Vernunft* announced) and yet also unify his thoughts into an organic coherence worked as a confirmation for him that he, who had been created *in imago Dei*, could think in terms that transcended the visible.

<sup>161</sup> *BL*, VIII, 74.

<sup>162</sup> *BL*, XII, 154. The two different acts of the intellect that are necessary 'to obtain adequate notions of any truth' are the acts of division and the unification. Nonetheless, they are not equal. While division is the technical *process* of philosophy, unification ought to be the *result* (Cf. XIV, 171). It is his lament that the *process* is usually proposed and accepted *as the result* by philosophers.

<sup>163</sup> *BL*, V, 57.

<sup>164</sup> G.W.F. Hegel. *Science of Logic*. (1969). 166.

<sup>165</sup> In fact, the suggestion that creativity perhaps *ought* to be limited to the guidelines set by nature was not really explored by Coleridge with the same interest that it was by the young Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein*.

To present this in more philosophical *terms* (as the *Biographia* does more frequently than some of his other works), if the imagination's capacity to think in universal terms and yet present a unity in a particular form did not begin by originating spontaneously from the pure origin of nothingness (i.e. of transcendence taken as the origin of nature), how did it work then? For 'rather than admitting that we can never achieve certain knowledge of first principles, and then insisting on absolute coherence and closure between the parts of any system built upon those *assumed* first principles, Romantic aesthetics insists upon a recourse to emptiness, a re-founding in imperceptible beginnings, at every point of transition between the parts of its systems.'<sup>166</sup> But Coleridge suggests on the other contrary, in reflecting on the historical development of philosophy, the imagination functioned in a *via media*: 'Our inward experiences were... arranged in three separate classes: the *passive* sense, or what the school-men call the merely receptive quality of the mind; the *voluntary*; and the *spontaneous*, which holds the middle place between both.'<sup>167</sup> The imagination certainly did not copy and slavishly associate given things – he attributed that power to a faculty he designated the fancy. The imagination on the contrary was 'at once active and passive' – and *thus* 'spontaneous.' The 'spontaneity' of Coleridge's 'organicism' is decidedly different from his contemporaries.

This mediating role needs to be expanded slightly. To be accounted *passive*, the imagination of man had to acknowledge the priority of the creation of the world and, more importantly still, of himself in the divine image. If there is any doubt on Coleridge's intentions on this point, without such an acknowledgement, it would have been impossible for him to say that the primary imagination involves the '*repetition* in the finite mind of the Infinite I AM' and still claim a distinction for the imagination from the fancy. To be *active* however, and therefore *voluntary*, it required the same acknowledgement of creation (and specifically of its *repeatability* by virtue of being made *in imago Dei*). Coleridge selects his words very carefully then when he concludes his rejection of Wordsworth's attempt to ground the selection of the transcendent on Nature: it is, he says, 'impracticable; and if not impracticable, it would still be useless. For the very power of making the *selection* implies the previous possession of the language *selected*.'<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Simpson. *op. cit.* 181.

<sup>167</sup> *BL*, V, 54. It is worth comparing the active or voluntary element of the act of imagination in Wordsworth and Coleridge. In Wordsworth's case, the voluntary element is contained in what he called the original transcendent process of 'selection'; Coleridge, on the other hand, attributed that 'voluntary appropriation' to be that 'of fixed symbols to internal acts.' (XVII, 197)

<sup>168</sup> *BL*, XVIII, 201.

What then is the 'spontaneous, which holds the middle place' between the passive and the active? Here we must look to Kant and to Coleridge's interpretation of the importance of Kant's philosophy, in particular of his concept of Reason. I think Leslie Brisman is correct in suggesting that 'Coleridge borrows the term *Reason* from Kant, but all his own is its association with the Holy Spirit over and against the Understanding and the 'natural' faculties of the mind.'<sup>169</sup> Coleridge as suggested earlier consistently uses the Kantian term Reason differently than a more conventional reading of Kant would suggest, as a drive for *meaning*. He differs as much in his reading of Kant as do those who have tried to understand *him* as a philosopher in the more conventional Kantian mould. Whether Coleridge is right in this supposition about Kant's motives is difficult to discern.

What is more certain is *his* consistency in interpreting the concept of reason as 'right reason,' that is as the inclination of the mind of man towards freedom, towards the 'unconditioned,' towards God, as a result of the work that the Holy Spirit had done in forming the 'civilised' intellect:

In order to have an efficient belief in Christianity a man must have been a Christian, and this is the seeming *argumentum in circulo* incident to all spiritual truths, to every subject not presentable under the forms of time and space, as long as we attempt to master by the reflex acts of the understanding by what we can only know by the act of becoming. 'Do the will of my father, and ye shall know whether I am of God.' (287)

This association of Kant's Reason, *rightly* understood, with the work of the Holy Spirit is very helpful in explaining what Coleridge intended by the term 'spontaneous' and its 'middle place' between the passive and the voluntary. It also helps us to resolve the central problem of Kantian philosophy, the repeated reference to 'spontaneity' at crucial junctures. Andrew Bowie explains why the term 'spontaneity' is entirely crucial to all of Kant's Critiques. It is related to the problem Kant has of grounding self-consciousness as the highest principle of his scientific and moral philosophy. In that concept the problem of understanding our free will is linked to the problem of describing the existence of self-consciousness:

As we saw, there can be no evidence of freedom, which Kant calls a 'fact of Reason,' because it cannot appear. Freedom is, though, the centre of Kant's enterprises. He talks of a 'causality through freedom' which can bring into new states of the world which can only result from our free activity. Reason, the 'capacity for purposes,' realises something which cannot be empirical – freedom – in the world. How, though, are we to know this? As we shall see, Kant's aesthetics will later try to provide an answer to that question. Reason involves something which is infinite, in the sense that it cannot in any way be determined by anything finite we know about the world. It 'shows a spontaneity so pure that it goes beyond everything with which sensuousness can provide it.'<sup>170</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Leslie Brisman. 'Coleridge and the Supernatural.' (Summer 1982). 125.

<sup>170</sup> Andrew Bowie. *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. (1990). 21.

Kant's difficulty in grounding self-consciousness and delineating freedom is not Coleridge's. The 'spontaneity' that he refers to as a 'middle ground' between pure passivity and pure voluntarism is provided for him by God as he has revealed himself. This revelation acts as the truth, the realm of the primary imagination, which 'is its own light and evidence, discovering at once itself and falsehood,' and it is 'the prerogative of poetic genius' to imitate it and 'to distinguish by parental instinct its proper offspring from the changelings which the gnomes of vanity or the fairies of fashion may have laid in its cradle or called by its names.'<sup>171</sup>

This association of spontaneity with divine revelation indeed clarifies Coleridge's explanation of the various facets of the imagination. It is probably helpful to repeat them here:

The imagination... I consider either as primary, or secondary. 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 infinite I AM. The secondary I consider to be an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.<sup>172</sup>

The primary imagination, as Coleridge calls it, is the symbolic and 'prejudiced' basis by which the finite mind can think and act and 'live,' the work and life of the Holy Spirit. It is what he commonly refers to as 'the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world,' the very 'translucent' quality that the symbol incorporates. 'But if it be asked by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style, if he do not adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road or plough field?

I reply: by principles, the ignorance or neglect of which would convict him of being no poet, but a silly or presumptuous usurper of the name! By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology! In one word, by such a knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art as, if it had been governed and applied by good sense and rendered instinctive by habit, becomes the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights and conclusions, and acquires the name of taste... by the power of imagination proceeding upon the *all in each* of human nature... by meditation, rather than observation... and by the latter in consequence only of the former.<sup>173</sup>

Coleridge's primary imagination, then, does not meet the expectations of the rationalist. It is not primary in the sense of being innate, it is primary in the sense of being fundamental and

<sup>171</sup> BL, XVIII, 218.

<sup>172</sup> BL, XIII, 167.

<sup>173</sup> BL, XVIII, 217-18.



logically prior to the application of the secondary.<sup>174</sup> Its universality derives from being instituted by the acts of God, foundationally in the Bible and continually by the consonant work of the Holy Spirit, not from the mind's *derived* capacity of universality. Coleridge's poet, who uses the secondary imagination, is a second maker, but only in so far as he is guided by the first.

It is difficult to assess Coleridge's equation of the imagination with the work of the Holy Spirit. On the positive side, it offers an account of universality that is nonetheless rooted in tradition and which lays hold of eternal truths. It does not fall foul of the Kantian 'prejudice against prejudice' at the first hurdle by entering the *aporia* of the spontaneity, nor does it shrink away from confronting the rationalist's paranoia of falling back upon 'dogmatic assertions.' On the contrary, I think he genuinely tries to resolve the central problem of Kant's spontaneity, the infinite regression that marks the 'pure' use of reason. He is entirely right in noting that Kant's allegedly pure use of reason could only have been based on the legacy of Christianity. It was the underlying prejudice for both him and his audience in their attempt to explain the findings of Newton's universal science in terms of human psychology. Coleridge's definition of the imagination is an attempt to link an account of 'true prejudices' to the power of the mind to think in universal terms and to be open to freedom, without dispensing with the integrity of the foundation upon which it was based. In this attempt, he provided two prime examples of the imagination at work, the Biographia itself and Kant's use of the secondary imagination in breaking the 'slavery' of materialist and associationist theories of the workings of the mind.

Deviating from the underlying theological thrust of the Biographia, which constitutes its unity, had of course more practical implications that Coleridge was also at pains to demonstrate in the 'practical criticism' of the second half. Taken as a whole, the work argues that bad theology makes for bad philosophy and leads, eventually, to bad poetry. He demonstrates in its second half that because Wordsworth's Preface proposes a theory of poetry that is fundamentally anti-artistic and incomprehensible, yet inspires a degree of admiration bordering on 'religious fervour,' it not 'rebels against existence as it has been given' but also constitutes a profound intellectual and spiritual heresy. For what Wordsworth calls 'selection' in the Preface, the process of 'situating' and even identifying oneself with

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<sup>174</sup> To go back to the symbol of light, used here in a more literal sense, he makes an analogous point with regard to it that he does to language:

It would be easy to explain a thought from the image on the retina, and that from the geometry of light, if this very light did not present the same difficulty. (BL, VIII, 77)

another's sensations inspired by his organicism, Coleridge refers to as an abstraction of the fancy:

Fancy, on the contrary, has no counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phaenomenon of the will which we express by the word *choice*. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.<sup>175</sup>

It is plain that what Wordsworth designates as 'selection' and gives transcendent power in the Preface, Coleridge confronts with his notions of the 'imagination' in the Biographia, notions to which the two-world view was intrinsic and, as Coleridge implicitly argued it, necessary for comprehension to take place. The collapse of the two was what gave Wordsworth's poetry its distinctive power – its capacity to allude to more than met the eye – but 'just distinctions' needed to be maintained in order to prevent grievous error (such as Wordsworth's theory presented), and bad poetry, as his followers produced, from resulting.

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<sup>175</sup> BL, XIII, 167.

## Chapter 4 Shelley's Organicist Theology in Mont Blanc

### *Shelley's utopian argument*

On Sunday, 20 July 1816, three weeks after having returned from his Swiss lake tour with Lord Byron and shortly after having written his Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, Shelley set off from Geneva with his wife Mary and her half-sister Claire Clairmont to visit the valley of Chamouni, a well-known tourist resort. On the path from Servoz, three leagues from Chamouni, they were confronted with the majestic landscape surrounding Mont Blanc. The effect of this landscape on Shelley was profound. He described the experience in a letter to Peacock:

Mont Blanc was before us, but it was covered with cloud; its base, furrowed with dreadful gaps, was seen above. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone through the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of exstatic wonder, not unallied to madness. And remember this was all one scene, it all pressed home to our regard and our imagination. Though it embraced a vast extent of space, the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path; the ravine, clothed with gigantic pines, and black with its depth below, so deep that the very roaring of the untameable Arve, which rolled through it, could not be heard above – *all was as much our own, as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others as now occupied our own. Nature was the poet, whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest.*<sup>176</sup>

It was a theophany of sorts for him, but the terms his response took to it were altogether strange. On the one hand, he claimed the experience to have been so intense, it was akin to a private possession. One might have expected it therefore to be inestimable, as things of intimate worth tend to be. However, it seems to be precisely the intimate 'proximity' of the experience to him that led Shelley to identify it with *creating* the impression in others' minds. This could be attributed to simple immodesty on Shelley's part, delusions of grandeur. But the association bears too great a similarity with Wordsworth's own to be simply accounted so. I explore the multivalent results and effects of Shelley's claims, first to *own* the scene he beheld in Mont Blanc and then to be its *author* on his relationships between himself, his audience and God in the following.

The language of the poem is characterised by tones, diction and even ostensible subject matter that are fittingly Wordsworthian. However much the influence of Wordsworth marks the poem though, it is still very much one bearing the distinctive stamp of Shelley's idiosyncratic genius. The idiosyncrasies of the Shelleyan style and thinking in the poem belie

attempts to bracket it simply as an imitation of the efforts of Wordsworth or Coleridge,<sup>177</sup> though the nature of the relation to his predecessors is one of the many important issues which must engage a critique of the poem. Many of these telltale marks were the product of Shelley's studied intellectual inclinations, but, at the time he wrote the poem, various other ideas amenable to his general outlook were also commanding his interest, as we know from his letters to Peacock – Buffon's theory of Nature's inevitable self-destruction, Peacock's 'esoteric Indian dualism,' and the curious but characteristic connection he made between God's non-existence and tyranny.

Shelley's Mont Blanc provides an interesting twist on the foundation that Wordsworth had set in directing his poetry towards the transcendental state of *feeling* produced by 'selecting' an 'aspect more sublime' on life. For if Wordsworth presented, as Coleridge was to demonstrate in the Biographia, a fundamental intellectual error and theological heresy by suggesting that this artistic imaginative act needed no recourse to any prejudice but life itself, Shelley embraced his poetic self-representation as a mediator of life that much more radically and resolutely. David Simpson explains the dynamics of Romantic poetry to run according to an analogy of a living organism, a process whose attraction he traces to its ability to avoid the idea of causality:

Rather than admitting that we can never achieve certain knowledge of first principles, and then insisting on absolute coherence and closure between the parts of any system built upon those *assumed* first principles, Romantic aesthetics insists upon a recourse to emptiness, a re-founding in imperceptible beginnings, at every point of transition between the parts of its systems. The organic model itself, whilst appearing to introduce an indubitable continuity, yet locates that continuity at some level beyond or within what can be apprehended as phenomenal appearance; we can only wonder at the transition from seed to blossom.<sup>178</sup>

This is precisely the effect of a shift from an understanding of life as the work of a Divine Creator to an understanding of life according to the model of an organism that Arendt recorded. It is with the intent of recasting the similarly causal, monotheistic associations of the Deist *topos* into the terms of an organism that we must understand Shelley's Mont Blanc. For not only did he attempt to undermine and obscure the notion of *agency* in language, he also attempted to remove the sense of nature as having been created by an agent. He did so in various ways: through allegiance to various explicitly heretical doctrines and symbols, through a process of embracing the Wordsworthian sense of universality as an epistemology and through the deconstruction of his own metaphors.

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<sup>176</sup> 'To Thomas Peacock, Esq.' July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1816. The Complete Works of Shelley. VI. (1965), 137. (my italics)

<sup>177</sup> Coleridge poem 'Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni' used the same landscape for its reflection some years earlier, as Shelley certainly must have known.

It is by these means that Shelley demonstrates in a way more consistent than any of his contemporaries the intellectual and spiritual implications of the Wordsworth's Romantic aesthetic, founded upon a generative emptiness (*natura naturans*). In a sense, he can be seen in this demonstration as Coleridge's *negative image*. Whereas Coleridge attacked Wordsworth's premises of the poet as a 'natural' mediator of the processes of life and argued for the positive necessity of prejudices, in particular the terms and conditions of the primary imagination in order to create (rather than be 'fanciful') and the formative effect of the *sensus communis* upon understanding in order to understand, Shelley, in embracing Wordsworth's premises as radically as he did, demonstrated their absurdity by demonstrating how they undermined the idea of *agency* in terms of presentation. The issue of Shelley's *obscurity* and how it is we are to *understand* it is then the main topic of the discussion in Mont Blanc. It is my contention that Shelley's consistent adherence to the organic model of life causes him to lose artistic authenticity in the poem, because the reader is left without the orientation provided by a distinction between the poet's perspective and the world he surveys.

My hermeneutic aim at reading Shelley is somewhat novel, but it is certainly not without its predecessors. For the most part, these have concentrated on the immediate effect of Shelley's use of language, though there have always been the undertones of heresy in Shelley's poetics. Matthew Arnold simply thought him a 'beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.' F.R. Leavis more trenchantly complained that Shelley habitually confused the *tenor* and the *vehicle* of his metaphor. The failure to dissociate the two, a consequence of Shelley's 'weak grasp on the actual,' also led him, in Leavis's estimation, to write ineffectually. At one time, Leavis's sympathies were so widely held that Shelley's place in the literary canon was in serious doubt. An entire reassessment of Shelley has taken place in more recent decades however. Richard Cronin offers a more sympathetic response to Shelley's poetry, more characteristic of the revival of Shelley's standing as a poet in recent decades, defending his use of metaphor *as one befitting his intentions for it*, as 'the picture of an integral thought':

Metaphor, for Shelley, is most powerful when it is not a comparison between one thing and another, but a single, whole apprehension which refuses analysis into its constituent parts. Indeed... Shelley suggests that the use of metaphors in which tenor and vehicle are clearly distinguished is an evidence of *imaginative weakness*.<sup>179</sup>

Cronin is no doubt right when he suggests that Leavis's objection essentially denies Shelley the validity of his use of metaphor. It is worth remarking in passing what will be commented

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<sup>178</sup> David Simpson. *op.cit.* (1981). 181.

<sup>179</sup> Richard Cronin. Shelley's Poetic Thoughts. (1981). 21. (my italics)

upon in greater detail in the following: Cronin's description of Shelley's use of the word 'imaginative' and 'metaphor' demonstrates precisely how far words can be stretched to *represent the aporia* of incomprehensibility around a Romantic notion of 'imperceptible beginnings.' For surely a metaphor that does not compare cannot by definition be a metaphor; similarly incomprehensible is the notion of the imagination without a coherent sense of agency to divide the agent from the world he imagines.

Cronin suggests that the mark distinguishing Romantic verse from its poetic forebears is that, 'put briefly, meaning in Augustan verse is aggregative, meaning in Romantic verse is propositional.' (15-16) This sounds authoritative, but what does it mean? It means, he explains, that in Shelley's verse, 'character or value' 'do not exist outside the temporal sequence of... words.' Poetic creation, in other words, is taken in Romantic terms to have a sense compatible with its understanding of life as a 'spontaneous' appearance. It is coterminous and coeval with the process of speaking. The former practice appeals to the meaning of words and concepts and distinctions established by tradition, even when deviating from it; the latter claims to begin the whole process *ex nihilo*, as a 'self-interpreting orphan.'<sup>180</sup>

Cronin's remark is helpful in explaining the frequent confusion of tenor and vehicle in Shelley's use of metaphor. What he gives insufficient attention to though is the manner in which Shelley's poetic practice does, on a broader scale, exactly what he claims Leavis's does to Shelley's writing in particular – it questions the *validity* of artistic associations. For Shelley's own self-referential use of language inherently rejects the validity of referential language, metaphoric or otherwise. His practice of rejecting or manipulating orthodox references is, with the possible exception of Blake, more consistent and resolute than his contemporaries. Since the late 1970s, the balance has swung to support the validity of the tenor and thus the vehicles of Shelley's claims, or at the very least the failed workings of his metaphor. What Shelley has demonstrated for critics most strongly informed by deconstructive practices of reading is his '*heteroglossy*,' the genuine conflicts in his writing that transcend even the New Critics' attempts to resolve them (and preserve the sacred integrity of 'organic form') by appealing to a supervening process of irony. Shelley has gone from being outside the 'Romantic canon' to being, in many critics' eyes, central to it precisely because of his heteroglossy. That revision has however itself occurred, to use Cronin's terms, in a 'propositional' fashion. The actual grounds whereby validity may be judged have only rarely been assessed in criticism, regardless of whether one accepts the validity of a self-

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<sup>180</sup> Lundin. *op. cit.* 24.

referential use of language or of a more traditional 'aggregative' use of language.

However, Leavis's criticism, for all of its contrary charges of Shelley's own 'imaginative weakness,' does not even concern itself with the *intentions* of Shelley's use of metaphor (though he seems to discern them as clearly as Cronin and many others have). It simply suggests that authorial intention cannot be the criterion of validity without qualification: a subjective perspective that acts on the presumption that it legitimates itself and invalidates itself. Since we can observe in the different hermeneutic processes of verse before and after the Romantics (reflecting different theological premises and different common senses) an entirely different tendency of authorial intention before and after the Romantic period, it is clear that legitimacy cannot be contingent simply upon that intention. The real question then is which use of language is legitimate, and since we are dealing with two opposing conceptions, the solution to that question obviously does not lie in the realm of authorial intention *per se*.

If we cannot accept authorial intention as the criterion of legitimacy in and of itself, an insight which alone will already make us ill at ease with Shelley's apparently self-referential use of language, how can we approach the poem in a manner that will engage with the conventional notions of agency related to the *topos* of Mont Blanc and representation of them in terms of processes? Richard Holmes, one of Shelley's biographers, claims that Shelley's emotional response to the landscape around Mont Blanc was informed by the intellectual position he had already adopted as an *atheist*.<sup>181</sup> Although this does not appear to be helpful, it is one of the keys to interpreting a difficult poem to which a coherent position is otherwise difficult to attribute, indeed one which displays conflicting and shifting impulses. To be sure, the concerns of the poem are many, but that is the one that accounts for the rest. However, it is precisely this claim that is also so problematic. For how are we to understand atheism without an established and prejudicial notion of theism? And how do we understand 'heteroglossy' without the established prejudices of personal agency and voice? Shelley's presentation of atheism is a far more complex subject than it appears. As I just stated, his atheism is informed as much by universal philosophical scepticism (in the form and process of the 'Romantic hermeneutic') and by his radical attempts to subvert the logical notion of agency in the poem as it is by the explicitly 'conventional heresies' we can note in it. How can these 'heresies' be *understood* except as varying attempts to present an alternative to orthodoxy, in other words, how can they be understood except as attempts which share the

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<sup>181</sup> Richard Holmes. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. (1974). 340.

common sense of failure and impracticability? These are considerations that will inform my reading of Shelley's literary critics and my assessment of Mont Blanc.

One of the modes by which atheism is expressed in this poem compatible with the notion of an organic model is in the dualistic terms of natural forces. Shelley combined in a novel manner the putative supremacy of the natural forces of Peacock's Indian deity Ahrimanes, the spirit of darkness, cold and death, with the supremacy of the 'large codes of fraud and woe' of the Christian God over their respective opposing forces of Oromazes, the spirit of light and warmth, and the powers of the poet. Further on in his letter to Peacock he makes his agreement with Buffon's theory of natural entropy clear, but denies it to be his intention to write upon natural effects so much as the terrible effects of such tyrannous power on humanity:

I will not pursue Buffon's sublime but gloomy theory, that this earth which we inhabit will at some future period be changed into a mass of frost. Do you who assert the supremacy of Ahriman imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death and frost, sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the unsparing hand of necessity, & that he casts around him as the first essays of his final usurpation avalanches, torrents, rocks & thunders – and above all, these deadly glaciers at once the proofs and symbols of his reign. – Add to this the degradation of the human species, who in these regions are half deformed or idiotic & all of whom are deprived of anything that can excite interest & admiration. This is a part of the subject more mournful & less sublime; – but such as neither the poet nor the philosopher should disdain.<sup>182</sup>

Despite his resolution not to pursue Buffon's 'gloomy' theory, the tone of Mont Blanc is hardly cheery and it does seem to synthesise those aspects of Ahriman with the Deist God that many others had come to associate with Mont Blanc. His dismissal of Buffon's theory is probably more closely associated with Peacock's assertion of the *supremacy* of 'Ahriman' rather than the vestiges of his 'presence' that he acknowledged to be in Mont Blanc's landscape. Shelley objected to all these associations of God together, as befitted the 'democrat, philanthropist and atheist' he considered himself to be.<sup>183</sup>

These vestiges had other connotations for Shelley though. For both him and his companions, the emotional association of the mountain with an omnipotent but benevolent God by increasing swathes of well-heeled tourists to the region was infuriating, given their blindness to the ills of the local inhabitants. This wilful blindness to the plight of the wretched inhabitants simply encapsulated for them these tourists' equal insensitivity to the penurious effects of their own tyrannous religion and government at home. Shelley's

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<sup>182</sup> 'To Thomas Peacock, Esq.' July 24, 1816. The Complete Works of Shelley. VI. (1965), 140.



association of the imagery of Ahriman and what he represented to both Deist and Christian frames of thought is the largely unspoken synecdoche of the poem, but the polemic against Christianity is really the stronger because it is implicated in a general attack on the evil of the conditioning effects of 'ossified' language in a way that the Deist thought is not.

The debate between Peacock and Shelley was of course protracted and emerged some years later in the context of his more famous and aggrieved reply in The Defence of Poetry (composed 1821, published 1840) to Peacock's pessimistic Four Ages of Poetry (1820). The nature of Shelley's divergence from Peacock's Ahriman on this point can perhaps be seen more clearly and helpfully, if in a different light there. The weight of his argument rests upon the distinction Shelley wants to uphold between two *kinds* of utility and their relationship to some immutable and universal criterion of pleasure:

...poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the *imagination* is most *delightful*, but it is alleged that that of *reason* is more *useful*. Let us examine as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by Utility. Pleasure or good in a general sense, is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks, and in which when found it acquiesces. There are two kinds of pleasure, one durable, universal, and permanent; the other transitory and particular. Utility may either express the means of producing the former or the latter. In the former sense, whatever strengthens and *purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful*. But the meaning in which the Author of the Four Ages of Poetry seems to have employed the word utility is the narrower one of banishing the importunity of the wants of our animal nature, the surrounding men with security of life, the dispersing the grosser delusions of superstition, and the conciliating such a degree of mutual forbearance among men as may consist with the motives of personal advantage. (500-01)

Whereas Peacock associated utility in Benthamite terms with the amelioration of the *conditions* surrounding humanity (including their social relations) and he commended reason as their governor, the more 'universal utility' Shelley claimed (and suggested is particularly effected by poetry) results from a more profound act of engaging with and changing the *human condition* itself.<sup>184</sup> The connection between Shelley's earlier divergence from the views of Peacock and the Deists, which he elaborated upon in Mont Blanc, and his more famous one here in The Defence is clear: others' Mont Blancs, particularly those of other poets, in either their 'rational' use of language or rational intentions, i.e. their appeal to notions of causality, only refer to conditioning forces. Their utility can therefore be praised in

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<sup>183</sup> Holmes records that this is how he described himself in a series of hotel registers in the region. *op. cit.* 342.

<sup>184</sup> Since we are already conditioned beings by merely being in the world, the distinction in utility which Shelley wishes to make here regarding a certain use of language seems at best one of degree rather than of kind. However, the import of what he is saying is clear even if the distinctions are not –

a limited and transitory manner at best,<sup>185</sup> whereas his Mont Blanc, both in its use of language and its intention, addresses the human condition confronting those conditions and is thus universal.

When it comes to critical assessments of Shelley's enterprise in Mont Blanc, it is surprising that given his acknowledged antipathy to Deism that there have not been more attempts than there are to read the poem as the attempt by a prophet of another religious persuasion to assert his own claims. That aspect of the poem obviously places Mont Blanc firmly in the sublime tradition. Just as Coleridge in his poem 'Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni' rather incongruously associated the mountain with the God of the Bible, Shelley also used poetic license to dismiss both. One reason for an occasional lack of critical attention may be that Shelley's poem is in a sense also a predominantly self-conscious poem, expressing the nature of poetic creation. It presents Shelley's notion of the spirit of poetry (which draws it into intimate relation to his concept of humanity) and enacts its own theory on itself. This aspect of the poem seems purely self-referential. Given that self-referentiality however, it is also surprising that more critics have not focussed on the philosophical and linguistic ramifications of this form of self-consciousness in Mont Blanc either, since the philosophical-linguistic theory is *itself* inherently nihilistic to the point of obscurity. What is most surprising though is that the two aspects have not been adequately combined in a critical reading, as both are very much a part of the poem.

The reason why they have not been adequately combined is apparent – there is no conventional concept or *topos* that can encompass both the intention of parodying the tradition of the sublime (which would invite judgement according to that model) and the intention to be purely self-referential (which can, it is claimed, be judged only according to the human condition – whatever that is). The two claims are mutually exclusive. Since however the atheist perspective in the poem is patent in it, it follows on from that that if no *topos* can encompass this position, its position must be *utopian*.<sup>186</sup> I hope to demonstrate then that two seemingly contrary yet complementary projects are part of the great undertaking in Mont Blanc: on the one hand, Shelley presents a utopia, in the strictest sense of a perspective

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'Poets are the unknown legislators of the world' in whose service the votaries of reason govern, albeit without the knowledge of what Shelley calls 'the spirit.'

<sup>185</sup> Language is itself one, if not the primary, of the conditioning forces. Ahrimanes' attributes of darkness, cold and death, are taken by him to symbolise necessity, tyranny and indeed all the negative governing (or conditioning) powers of authority.

<sup>186</sup> By using the term 'utopian' I am intending a literal sense of the word as 'no place' rather than its conventional association as an ideal place. The reader may choose to see the irony in my usage of it upon reviewing the critical arguments that tend to idealise and laud these tendencies in the poem.

of *no place* by *no one*; on the other, he alludes to the traditional *topos* an allusions of this Mont Blanc in the writing of others. This allows Shelley's utopia to appropriate the same intellectual ground as what it alludes to. This utopian character, in other words, is a product of Shelley's organic model, which incorporates the *res extensae* of the surrounding world into his *res cogitans*.

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What I am assessing in the following is Shelley's assessment of the human condition, which stems from his inclusion of the transcendent (the literary absolute) within his concept of the self.

## 1. Critical Responses

There are four critics I look at in the following, all of whom have seized on aspects of Shelley's obscurity and its relation to the topos of the poem. I have not presented them in any particular order, but I do critique them with as much an eye on Shelley and the reading of the poem I shall present as a summary of what they have written.

### i) Frances Ferguson

Frances Ferguson addresses Shelley's engagement with the mountain as a Deist symbol and states, 'in his efforts to counter the myth of natural religion that is attached to *Mont Blanc*, Shelley does not destroy the mountain's symbolic value but merely inverts it.'<sup>187</sup> Her observation is true in two senses: firstly, it tacitly accepts other poets' Deist connotations and merely reverses their verdict – God is not an extension of nature – the mountain *qua* mountain would say nothing were it not for 'the human mind's imaginings.' Secondly, the poet appropriates the legitimating role from the 'mountain.' Though the second point controls the first, these two aspects of the inversion are inextricably linked.

Ferguson's article falls into the pattern established by Earl Wasserman of understanding the poem's meaning according to its form, as an 'epistemological' demonstration. Far from being the exercise of pedantry that such a formal practice might suggest, it raises questions with far broader implications. This is particularly the case in this poem because the description of *Mont Blanc*, she suggests, is invaded by the allusions it makes to universal forces and the mind's interplay with them. She presents the strengths and weaknesses of his approach most clearly in her analysis of Wasserman's discussion of the two irresolvably contradictory tropes of the poem, *sufficiency* and *excess*.<sup>188</sup> Hers is as much a critique in dialogue with his as with the poem itself, a practice that seems warranted by the very tenor of the observations that Wasserman made. It was of course significant in informing the conclusions that Wasserman reached that he used the idea of *tropes*, conventionally referring to a figure of *style*, to express the *semantic* claims in Shelley's poem.

<sup>187</sup> Frances Ferguson. 'Shelley's *Mont Blanc*: What the Mountain Said.' (1993). 43-55. 45.

<sup>188</sup> Starting perhaps with Earl R. Wasserman's magisterial treatment of the poem in *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (1971), in which he posited in the first six lines of *Mont Blanc* the voice of the mind and the 'Universal mind,' critics have understood there to be different voices in the poem. Wasserman's suggestion is helpful in so far as it demonstrates how the *poet's finite mind* tends towards *universality*. It is also clear however, that although he makes this allusion, Shelley deliberately avoided making voices understood in an exclusive sense explicit in the poem.

Form and content, allusion and meaning thereby became as inextricable in his critique as they had been, he claimed, in the poem itself.

Ferguson confirms the relevance of Wasserman's dualistic terms of sufficiency and excess to the form and content of Mont Blanc. The trope of *sufficiency*, she suggests, manifests itself in the poem in various ways. It can be seen in his description of the landscape's forces of action and reaction, such as we observe in the ravine's 'active' channelling of the river's flow and the latter's 'passive' formation by it. It is signified by Shelley's use of anagrams and other forms of phonic similitude such as his 'relational punning' of rave, ravine and Arve. And it is similarly prominent in his use of antitypes, such as we see in the mountain's correspondence to the vale in one instance, which transmutes to a correspondence with the cave in the next. These shifts are themselves attended by the changing 'location' of his narrative voice, which bring with it constant changes in perspective. Indeed this voice changes in respect to all aspects of the physical/ metaphysical world with which it engages itself in the poem *except* change per se – that would require a stable 'situation' which would render the other 'changes' empty rhetoric. The 'threat' of his poetry being reduced to mere rhetoric, Ferguson suggests, hangs over the poem.

The other trope Wasserman mentions, that of *excess*, follows closely upon the suggestions of sufficiency in the poem and leads to yet further attempts at supplying meet images to the landscape Shelley portrays, suggesting that what had seemed sufficient is not. For Ferguson, this practice of retroactively undermining his own tropes of sufficiency by suggesting their insufficiency produces a wonderful excess of images, with concomitant possibilities of meaning. She notes that Shelley's use of language in Mont Blanc glories in presenting the inextricable involvement of thoughts in the process of expressing (or becoming) other thoughts or in relating to things. Rather provocatively she remarks that this practice raises questions about the status of language. But instead of exploring the effect of Shelley's apparent refusal to make fixed discriminations upon the meaning of words or things, she prefers to give an account of its 'aesthetic effect,' its suggestion of wholeness and interrelatedness. Like Wasserman, whose intellectual thrust she broadly adopts, Ferguson sees the significance of Shelley's 'elaborate schema of reciprocity' to lie in its status as a 'metaphor for a total universe that is indifferently things or thoughts and that is located in the One Mind.'<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ferguson. *ibid.* 44.

However, Ferguson recasts Wasserman's argument in terms ostensibly more amenable to Shelley's own. She argues that these relations in the 'One Mind' are better understood by relating Shelley's alignment of epistemology to 'love' instead of the focus that Wasserman had suggested for them, to ontology. This departure from Wasserman's emphasis is the key feature of her reading of *Mont Blanc*. In re-adjusting Wasserman's terms, Ferguson seems to have made an advance on his reading because 'love' is a term of considerable interest to Shelley in a way that 'being' is not. The broader question of whether it is the function of criticism to recover authorial intention while ignoring a perceived failure of the poet to make himself comprehended I shall defer for the moment in order to trace the implications of her change in the *terms* of understanding Shelley's poetics. For even assuming that Ferguson's critical intention is sound, her reading raises a new critical difficulty. It requires us to understand exactly what Shelley meant by 'love.' Although it diverts us somewhat from Ferguson's reading of *Mont Blanc*, it is important to understand Shelley's meaning of 'love' in order to assess her critique, particularly since it seems to me that his sense of it is idiosyncratic.

### *Epistemology, Deism and Shelley's View of Love*

Fortunately, Shelley realised that his conception of love was sufficiently unconventional to write on it directly and explain his views. He provided his thoughts on the subject in an 1818 essay 'On Love.' Some brief extracts from that essay should be sufficient to acquaint us with its general thrust. However they cannot be presented without some comment on their context or some reflection on the established notion of the word. The first thing that should be noted is that he uses the word love in a sense that intentionally combines both personal and Christian *theological* implications. It is not only the universality of the love or the monotheistic overtones of the 'One Mind' common throughout his thought that suggests this, it is his explicit claim that the end of love is 'a proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap.'<sup>190</sup> The key theological point that Shelley makes about love entails removing a distinction (or equating) what are, in terms of Christian doctrine, different *kinds* of love. The Oxford English Dictionary describes these distinct kinds of love in theological usage as 'the *love of complacency*, which implies approval of qualities in the object, and the *love of benevolence*, which is bestowed irrespective of the character of the

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<sup>190</sup> I do not mean to deny the manifold allusions and nuances of the poem (nor in his writing as a whole) to other theological ideas. The poem has Gnostic elements, echoes of Lucretius, Plato and allusions to Arithmanes. But the literary theme he chooses in writing *Mont Blanc* is that which his immediate predecessors called 'the sublime' and his interest in using the idea of love in relation to it, which I believe Ferguson is right in noting that he does, evokes Christian connotations immediately.

object.’ Whereas the former is a more general sense of the word, the latter is the sense used by the apostle John to describe the *unique* salvational power of divine love when he writes ‘this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.’ (1 John 4:10)

However the dynamic of making the two senses synonymous is not quite as simple as removing a distinction or ‘questioning the status of language’ would suggest. Rather, a *series* of changes are brought about in Shelley’s concept of love in which characteristics of both are combined. Four interrelated things are worth noting about Shelley’s concept of love in his removal of the distinction between the complacent and the benevolent attributes of love. When seen in conjunction, they cause the external sense of the *sensus communis* to cede place to an internal sense but, more importantly in this instance, they lead to a notion of love that is *presented* in *complacent* terms yet purports to *function* as a substitute for the scheme of salvation enacted by Christ’s unique *benevolent* act of Divine love. This is the standard by which the currency of Shelley’s understanding of love more or less explicitly measures itself. The effect is comparable in this sense: while Christ’s sacrificial love acts as an atonement to cover *sin* and thereby restore believers in Him to a right relation with God, Shelley’s comparable act of love acts on the assumption that he shared with Kant and the Enlightenment: that he *could* remove *all prejudice* from human thinking and create a pure inner state of being. This ‘inner being,’ he suggests, is, the mind’s ‘own place,’ to use Milton’s words, a ‘paradise within, happier far.’

It is probably most helpful to arrive at an understanding of Shelley’s conclusion in his essay ‘On Love’ if I first make a series of observations about the philosophical and literary context in which Shelley was writing. It seems to me that these act to inform his conclusion about what love is. The first step in the process of appropriating the character of benevolent Divine love as a personal motive for ‘poetic action’ had already been made for him when Deist writers related the concept of love to a rational proxy of the divine, an absolute absence or ‘void,’ rather than to a personal notion of God.<sup>191</sup> The characteristic Deist conception of God that Shelley confronted in the poetry and philosophy of the Enlightenment portrayed Him as ‘a blind watchmaker’ who had set the universe in motion according to certain immutable ‘laws’ and had left it to run according to them. God was infinitely distant, impassible, infinite, absolute. This conception was reflected in the common literary topos of the eighteenth century, the sublime, which Shelley of course explicitly alludes to by writing

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<sup>191</sup> This is not to say that Shelley accepted these terms, as his polemic ‘Against Deism’ bears evidence, but that it nonetheless influenced the way he regarded the subject.

on Mont Blanc. The sublime experience was defined by the feeling of relief at having been preserved from the threat of being annihilated by something suggestive of these rational conceptions of the Creator, typically a grandiose landscape such as that of a mountain.

Shelley's advance on these inherited terms of understanding takes place when he reformulates them to suit an organic model. This organic model had a profound effect on the way he formulated and thus understood the whole experience of the sublime. It no longer led him, as it had his Enlightenment predecessors, to perceive the infinite (God) *externally* in (or beyond) nature. It led him to understand both the feeling of being threatened and the sense of relief from that threat as aspects of an *internal experience* of sublimity, i.e. as a function of his own mind's 'bodily' capacities. If we remember that this absence had the role of the 'Divine watchmaker,' we can understand his extraordinary, even 'revolutionary' claims for the power of creativity of the artist. Furthermore, this organic understanding of the absolute *as a function of his own capacities to perceive* leads him to claim an 'attraction' to the world that was *prompted by the intellectual void (God) within himself and the relations in his mind.*

This appropriation of the primary power of creation to the mind of the artist has a form of correspondence in another change in understanding that Shelley displays in contrast to the perspective of more 'objective' forms of rationalism. These have already been alluded to in the discussion of the second chapter of the reappraisal that Romanticism made in historicising and 'biologising' the 'world-view' of the Enlightenment. After Descartes' assumption of universal doubt had brought into question the connection between our thoughts and the world of things, scientists and the men of letters of the age were led to entertain various nightmare scenarios of solipsism, i.e. fears that the external world and life in it may not really exist.<sup>192</sup> 'Saving the appearances' was arguably the primary aim of experimental science and corresponding motivations can be seen to underlie philosophical and artistic speculation.<sup>193</sup> A famous response to the 'void' that had been created, which expresses the common sentiment, was uttered by Pascal in response to the blankness of the night sky: 'the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.'<sup>194</sup>

But the organic model and its *internalisation* of the absolute to 'historical' facticity as the 'spontaneity' of perception led Shelley to conclude that the void of incomprehensibility lay not between us and the world of appearances at all, but rather 'within our own thoughts.'

<sup>192</sup> Cf. A.D. Nuttall. *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination*. (1974).

<sup>193</sup> The difficulties with these explanations, which ranged from materialism to associative psychology to idealism, were traced by Coleridge in the first half of the *Biographia*.

<sup>194</sup> *Pensées*. iii. 206.



This meant that the void had effectively been repositioned.<sup>195</sup> The result of this repositioning was that he believed that the distinction between things and thoughts could not longer be made with any certainty.<sup>196</sup> This lack of distinction, combined with the 'creative universality' that accompanied the very act of thinking in his organicist model, led Shelley to his idea of unity. He expressed it coherently in his essay 'On Life,' some time after the essay in question:

The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy, is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words, *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.<sup>197</sup>

This sort of unity of 'life' in which the truth of distinctions was held to be entirely contingent upon perspective (or 'situation') and which could in turn be subordinated to the idea of one 'universal mind' seems to necessitate a radical revision of language itself. It undermines words and concepts that have aetiological connotations. The most important of these for the sake of the poem Mont Blanc was no doubt the model of the artist as a maker (*homo faber*), which ceded to the model of the artist as a mediator of the processes of life. This is the perspective on life of the *animal laborans*. Once this model was espoused, words could no longer properly be understood to *designate* the fundamentally different surrounding world, for they obeyed the same logic of the process as food does to the ingesting organism: that of *becoming* a part of the being that ingested it.

Ferguson is correct then – Shelley does often question the status of language. But this is not the focus of his essay 'On Love' or his poem Mont Blanc. In these writings, appropriating the idea of *universality* within a subjective perspective does not lead him to question the status of language. It leads him to question the status of the 'religious experience' of the *sublime* to which universality is related objectively in a landscape. This is precisely because of the *topos*'s association with being the work of the 'blind watchmaker.' For Shelley, the experience of the sublime may be better understood as an act projecting the universality of the 'human mind's imaginings' onto nature. This first attribute of his concept of love stems from that projection, its creation of a universal community. Quite against his Deist predecessors' views, from Shelley's organicist perspective the experience of the

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<sup>195</sup> This of course had the hermeneutic effect that was traced throughout the introductory chapters of the thesis, the *aporia*.

<sup>196</sup> This was the effect of David Hume's radical critique of cause-and-effect statements.

sublime leaves one neither with a sense of relief at having been preserved from the destructive forces of an omnipotent power, nor paralysed by a feeling of solipsistic isolation. It empowers him to *awaken* a *community* outside 'himself' according to the 'bodily' experience of the 'life' within:

(Love) is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves.<sup>198</sup>

The terms of this community, we note, are not those of a community *with* others but 'with what we experience within ourselves.' If these others are not of one mind with him on his organicist view of the One Mind, he feels himself wholly separate from them, a point that becomes clearer as his essay progresses. Shelley's humanistic love is inspired by the imperative of universalism, characterised by the tyranny of inexpressible conviction and prejudiced, in being located in thoughts, to be beyond discussion.

It is worth while to make a brief comparison of Shelley's sense of community to the more conventional senses of it which were discussed by Arendt in the second chapter. What is remarkable about Shelley's community is that it is neither conceived in relation to a *political* realm, i.e. a forum where other 'free' people can be related to and *communicated* with, nor is it related to the *private* realm of a family; nor is it even the relation of *communicants* across the ages 'in Christ,' 'as members of one body,' 'the priesthood of all believers.' Instead it is the 'community of the organism,' to use another seminal Romantic metaphor, in his 'marriage' to the world. But that marriage is centred upon and even inseparable from a 'situation' of 'internal experience.' Other people's agency is entirely secondary to Shelley's sense of community, and of love. They are organisms that obey certain natural laws, in disobedience to which, through immorality or a failure of reason, they can fall into disease, which according to Shelley 'is not a natural state of the human frame.'<sup>199</sup>

The second attribute of Shelley's concept of love is one that comes by way of what may be described as a process of 'idealised personification.' The absence of all forms of agency – of 'prejudices' in their broadest sense as *formal* characteristics – in the literary absolute, that had been appropriated for the individual organism by a subjective perspective, is projected *back* to form an idealised anthropology. The relationship is one of microcosm to

<sup>197</sup> 'On Life.' 477-78.

<sup>198</sup> 'On Love.' 472.

<sup>199</sup> 'The Vegetable System of Diet.' *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. E.B. Murray. (1993). 150. 'I hold that the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man originated in his unnatural habits of life.' 'A Vindication of Natural Diet.' *ibid.* 77.

macrocosm, or perhaps of cell to body. All forms of 'prejudice,' 'all we condemn or despise,' have been removed from this 'ideal relationship' by a process which Wordsworth had called 'selection' in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802). The lack of 'formal prejudice' of the 'chasm of an insufficient void' 'within our thoughts' is the basis of a love more pure and all-embracing than an exclusive sense of *personal agency* would permit if it was taken on its own terms:

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.

The third aspect of Shelley's concept of love is to be noted in the relationship of his 'ideal prototype' of man's 'intellectual nature' to the world. It bears remarkable and I think not coincidental similarity to the terms of Descartes' conception of the self as an immaterial mind (*res cogitans*) to which a material extension (*res extensa*) is fitted. He presents it first in a series of images that suggest its purging of prejudice before designating it as the invisible, utopian place to which 'Love tends':

Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particulars of which our nature is composed: a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype... this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules.<sup>200</sup>

The fourth aspect of love reflects on the conclusions he has reached hitherto. He tacitly corrects Wordsworth on his misplaced 'situation' of the origin of 'feeling' in nature, but he adopts his ethics of 'internal purity' against all forms of fixed prejudice, a purity to which the *solitude* of nature, corresponding to this pure void, relates. The self's universality, evoked either by 'solitude' or that 'deserted state' of unsympathetic company, is yet 'spoken to' by the silent eloquence of a correspondent universality in nature:

Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings and yet sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass and the waters and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring in the blue air there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind and a melody in the flowing of brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul, awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture...<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> 'On Love,' 473.

<sup>201</sup> 'On Love,' 473.

The terms that Shelley uses here to describe Love resonates in the diction and the 'social relationships' with 'nature' throughout Mont Blanc – but they are undeniably the internalised processes of the organism 'metabolising' with the world around it.

### *Love or death?*

If we try to decide whether Ferguson is more correct than in insisting that Shelley's epistemology is related to love than Wasserman is in relating it to ontology, we are in somewhat of a quandary. In Wasserman's defence, Shelley's definitions of love and life, with their refusal to distinguish between thoughts, things or individuals and tendency towards 'universality' free of prejudice makes it difficult to distinguish what he calls love from a less personal, intellectual engagement with the metaphysics of existence. Love for Shelley seems not to have any of the connotations of giving or of *personal* sacrifice that are common to a definition of the term – nor even the 'complacent' sense of the word as 'an approval of qualities in the object.' On the contrary, he presents it as a *want* of some 'inconceivable relation to something within the soul'<sup>202</sup> – food for the body of the mind. He also seems, in a manner consistent with his adoption of a praeternaturalist view of transcendence (or, what is entirely similar, his organicist view of universality), to have wholly secularised the concept of love. The dependent need of the creation and the creatures within it on their Creator depicted in the Biblical writings seems to have vanished. Shelley's need seems to be proportionate to that corresponding to *equals* – to a 'democratic' view of transcendence if you will or to dependent parts of a food chain.<sup>203</sup> And yet, while he has made 'complacent love' equivalent to 'benevolent love,' he has retained the power of salvation of the latter and related it to the authority of universality against *all forms* of prejudice.

Ferguson's view seems to differ little from Wasserman's then when we realise that Shelley's sense of love has been divested of its relation to our sense of being persons with the traditional attributes of personal agency. It has been reworked to be a relationship of 'intelligences' or sources of thoughts, imaginations, cells in the 'one life' of the organic universe. The term 'Love' has however the detraction of seeming to make *personal* what the entire tenor of Shelley's intellectual philosophy and the wandering perspective of his poetry

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<sup>202</sup> 'On Love.' 474. The narrowness of Shelley's definition of love to but half of its Christian conception (and recasting at the expense of a *personal* relationship) has perhaps been obscured by the fact that his presentation is made in the terms of a figuration of personal relationship that was itself merely a figural expression to begin with – the evocation of God's person by a lack in nature.

<sup>203</sup> Hugh Roberts helpful work Shelley and the Chaos of History (1997) suggests that we need to look to a Lucretian atomist perspective to understand Shelley's 'entropic' view on love, which is no doubt informative of Shelley's thought, but does not engage with the topos of Mont Blanc.

had rendered *impersonal*. The question then becomes whether *we* can even use Shelley's term of love, as Ferguson has, without a similar understanding of what it is. That would beg deeper questions than the answers that are provided by Shelley, and Ferguson offers us no illumination. To explain what I mean here by deeper questions, it seems impossible to conceive of love as a finite and mortal being without involving an 'answer' that addresses such things as the moral issues of good and evil or the perception of injustice in death. The capacity to think universally as individual organisms is no answer to that. It also ignores the multivalent connotations of the word love in the English language, which Shelley, as we have seen, collapses, but not at the expense of alluding to these connotations. Ferguson thus seems only to have perpetuated the confusion caused by Shelley's definition.

Secondly, to adopt Wasserman and Ferguson's reference to antipodal tropes in Mont Blanc, while it explains the 'sufficiency' of the relationships in the poem to term them those of love (in Shelley's sense), it does not account any better for the 'excess' that is present in the poem and in his 'intellectual philosophy' that both critics have been keen to emphasise. To correct this difficulty, that excess might more properly be termed as *insufficiency*, the more obvious antipode to *sufficiency*. But this merely quibbles with terms that are of secondary importance to the process of the poem. The process would be better described as one in which words repeatedly fail to meet their object because these objects are not conceived as such – they are parts of the continuing metabolic process of the organism. Once satisfied, a hunger for more is acquired. In other words, the trope that Wasserman sees as that of 'excess' could just as readily be seen as betraying the insufficiency of the previous, 'sufficient' image and lend itself to a sceptical view of language and all of the things it describes. This sort of 'radical' scepticism, which has been closely associated with Shelley by studies since Pulos,<sup>204</sup> is however only the polar opposite to Wasserman's view and not really an alternative, for it implicitly adopts the same rationalist premises on the crucial subject of metaphysics. It equally ignores the theological claims of the poem and how they are subverted by the organic model in the poem.

Ferguson's link of epistemology to love does have the merit though of tying the practice in the poem to the aesthetic model to which it adheres, that of the sublime landscape. For the experience of the sublime primarily results from the feeling of escaping some sort of threatened privation, whether of human society or of life itself. In the process of invoking 'feeling,' Ferguson's account brings the *personal* dimension of judgement that is so lacking in Shelley's account to the fore – though ironically perhaps by allusion to the word love's more

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<sup>204</sup> C.E. Pulos. The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism. (1954)

traditional and intensely *personal* sense! Shelley, Ferguson suggests, 'converts the isolation of the mountain from a threat into an opportunity.' (49) He does this by making the mountain and its surroundings *familiar*. For example, he addresses the mountain with the familiar 'Thou' and refers to the trees on it as its progeny: its 'Children of elder time', or 'giant brood of pines.' Ferguson claims that Shelley's apparently unusual use of the sublime is therefore completely Kantian because he cannot locate it in any of the sensible forms that his predecessors have. This neglects to consider the play of organicist thinking in the poem – which is not an aspect of Kantian thought. This landscape, and in particular its threat to annihilate him, was attractive to Shelley for two related reasons according to Ferguson: nature needs to be *perceived* to be destructive in order to create the sublime experience, and this in turn requires that he hypostatise 'an eternity of human consciousness.' To achieve both of these aims, his consciousness must simultaneously be personal and not-personal. Only an organic model of consciousness can explain such a depiction of continued reciprocity and its antagonism to the idea of causality.

On the whole, Ferguson's suggested reading of Mont Blanc is of no little merit, above all because it relates it to the familiar pattern of the sublime, which obviously influenced the form and content of the poem. Secondly, it makes an argument for the odd combination of the intimate emphasis, physical imagery and abstract philosophical ideas of the poem (even if she insufficiently illuminates her main term of distinction). This allows her a *basis* of confronting the problems in the poem, even if I am not convinced by it. Like in Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn Ferguson notes that the ending of Mont Blanc seems out of sorts with rest of the poem. She also asks the intriguing question at the outset of her article about how the mountain's silence relates to that of the urn, a question I hope to address later. For what Ferguson says here of Mont Blanc applies essentially to both great poems:

its power depends upon its never being able to move out of the world of death. Because it can never be alive, it can never be subject to death; because it can never be conscious, it can never experience fear (or love or any other emotion, anticipatory or otherwise). (52)

How does Shelley reconcile the final verse paragraph, in which the mountain is directly addressed as an agent, with the first four then, in which metabolic processes are depicted? It does indeed appear that in light of its predecessors that the final verse may 'represent a massive epistemological error and a mistake in love as well.' Ferguson seems unclear whether or not this is the case, partly because she does not fully acknowledge the problem with the use of the word love. She rightly interprets Shelley's portrayal of the interplay of the forces of the material world to contain a consistent confusion of these *activities* with the issue of *agency*. This confusion, she says, leads him and us to the insight

that 'in treating natural objects as occasions for sublime experience, one imputes agency (and therefore a moving spirit) to them.' (53) Shelley therefore argues that this is proof of *our* capacity for self-transcendence rather than evidence in nature's design pointing to a transcendent god according to Ferguson. What she does not acknowledge though is that this is only half of his practice. He also consistently (and more crucially) presents his own *agency* as if it were merely a natural *activity*. In other words, his is an argument by design, but he also claims to be a designer, a part of nature like the mountain certainly, but one who *speaks* and *lives*. This is a crucial tendency in the poem that is not addressed by Ferguson's critique.

Ferguson's closing remark involves her most intriguing claim in this respect, though she does not seem to see the implications, that Shelley:

collapses Kant's account of the 'purposiveness without purpose' that we discover in aesthetic objects as he speaks of Mont Blanc as if it had purposes in relation to humans. (52)

To my mind this he indeed does, but that is because he also conflates the Deists' merely transcendent god with a Christian God, that is a God also of personal relationship and of historical intervention. This makes it far more than merely the aesthetic poem that Ferguson concludes it is. However, this strange turn at the end of her exposition does not detract from the sensitivity of her other critical observations. Ferguson fails in her *description* only where the poem fails – in naturalising the sublime, in placing words in the silence and in asserting dim apprehensions of the sublime to be evidence of our power over it and signs of its submission to us. Most seriously, she does not ever question the problematic distinction between thought and things.

## ii) *Angela Leighton*

Like Frances Ferguson, Angela Leighton places Shelley and his Mont Blanc firmly in the tradition of the sublime. She sees the tradition to be so influential on Shelley's writing in fact that she suggests it functions as a guiding principle for understanding his writing as a whole. The sublime tradition, she says, is one in which 'the apparent emptiness of the scene is relieved by the mind's compensating sense of presence.'<sup>205</sup> She compares the poem more closely than Ferguson does to its immediate poetic precursors, to Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sunrise,' but concurs with her in argument that Shelley's aesthetic perennially divorces inspiration and composition, marking his own path in the artistic representation of the sublime. She provides a particularly keen insight into the dynamics of aesthetic theory by contrasting Shelley's poetic practice with Wordsworth's. She

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<sup>205</sup> Angela Leighton. Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems. (1984). 48.

notes that whereas Wordsworth is wont to recoil from the experience of terror of the sublime and the sense of loss its alienation engenders in him, and praises the recompense for it in a keener sensitivity to beauty in later years, Shelley strains in his poetic depictions for an immediate unity with 'the sublime' per se – which of course is by definition impossible. In other words, she says, while Wordsworth condemns Burke's sublime of terror, Shelley seems eager to accept it, but by doing so he pre-empts the experience.

This intention to embrace the transcendent is something that has consequences that Leighton, like Ferguson, is reluctant to grasp. They go far beyond her explanation of them as a perpetuation of the sublime tradition in new guise. We can observe how she mistakes the change by recapitulating her account of Shelley's appropriation of the sublime. Her own observations mark the crucial shift that Shelley's poetry makes from the sublime tradition to something that intends much more and at the same time much less than it. She notes, in a fairly standard *epistemological* description of the sublime, that:

The infinite vistas of the Alps traditionally indicate the presence of a Deity whose nature *exceeds the scope* of human comprehension, but who may be affirmed by that very excess. (48, my italics)

This summary of course already neglects to include the characteristic emotional state accompanying the experience of the sublime, a neglect which is telling. It paves the way for her next logical step, when she comes to summarise the attraction of that 'traditional' landscape for Shelley: 'The emptiness of the scene,' she says, 'is relieved by the mind's compensating sense of presence.' What we note about her summary of the sublime (which like Ferguson's is too sensitive to its subject) is that the original sense contained in the sublime that God must necessarily be infinitely *vast* in every sense (particularly those connoting the terror-inspiring sense of his *omnipotence*) has vanished. This leads her to draw the *sensible* implication that he is *not there*. By failing to note the 'loss of power' in the change, the 'epistemological reversal' that Shelley then makes appears a matter of course. Something that exceeds the maximum threshold of the senses is thereby (without sensual contradiction) easily equated with something below them, and with concomitant relational implications. This summary of course makes Shelley's practice seem to lie very much in the sublime tradition, for Shelley's practice entails that:

Such a Power *defies perception* by the senses but nonetheless commands the attention of the imagination. (48, my italics)

Leighton, like Shelley, equates the problem of sensory *inadequacy*, which presents itself in the way the *sublime* exceeds the threshold of human perception, with an Empiricist argument regarding the *unreliability* of the perception of *all things*. She thus has no difficulty in attributing to the mind this same transcendent Power, or to use the non-Shelleyan language of



Wasserman, Ferguson and Leighton, this 'compensating sense of presence.' Her reading, like that of the others, is somewhat 'emotionally illiterate.'

Leighton's expression of the issue is compatible with Shelley's then, but it is misleading as criticism. The failure of the senses in the sublime landscape becomes the primary issue for Shelley because it is the means to introduce its relation to silence for him and, in turn, a means of expressing the necessity of *his own act of language*: what is not there cannot speak. But the issue can be regarded far more accurately and far more conventionally. A more theistic expression (and a reading more sensitive to the *definitive* emotional aspect of the sublime experience) emphasises the inadequacy of human words to do justice to the majesty and splendour of God, but does not deny them nominative power. But even in relation to the purely epistemological concerns of the poem, it can still be maintained that language's inadequacy does not *necessitate* the conclusion that by Leighton's account appears unavoidable – that language is absolutely incapable of naming an object – even if its 'object' is transcendent. To regard language in this manner, again characteristically, applies absolute, 'universal' criteria to the use of language inappropriate to beings that are always already prejudiced by the terms of their human nature to make cause-and-effect statements and require such prejudices to understand (they are inherent in grammar). Leighton assumes, as Shelley did, that Hume was correct in rejecting the possibility of cause-and-effect statements. But Gadamer's demonstration of the *necessity* of prejudices re-opens the closed box on notions of causality.

This has far greater implications than is being acknowledged here and far greater relevance to the topic at hand. If Shelley's universalist assumption is accepted that words are like things, that is fundamentally unreliable, it entails that human language does not have the capacity to function as a medium by which man can disclose himself as an agent. Human words become not simply fragmentary and inadequate, they become void of any content whatever. Language, like the senses that are always held in suspicion by the Empiricist and the sceptic, becomes unreliable as words become like things. This is precisely what Shelley, as we have already seen, contended in his essay 'On Life' – and it is a fallacious assumption that critics influenced by post-Structuralism (as many contemporary critics attracted to Shelley are) share with him.

However, this is not the orthodox view of language, despite the frequency with which it is expressed in contemporary debates. On the contrary, the more established view, the view that stood the test of time until the onset of 'Romantic hermeneutics,' is that human language has the capacity to reveal the speaker because it resembles divine language.

This is explicit in the Genesis accounts in which God brings all that is into being through words, creates man in His own image and has man repeat His act by naming the creatures He has created. We have already seen how crucial this view was in Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination. A modern Biblical scholar describes the importance of language for God's self-revelation in the Biblical tradition by saying, that this self-revelation:

...is a distinct reality charged with power. It has power because it emerges from a source of power which, in releasing it, must in a way release itself.... No one can speak without revealing himself; and the reality which he posits is identified with himself. Thus the word... confers intelligibility upon the thing, and it discloses the character of the person who utters the word.<sup>206</sup>

Leighton's treatment of Mont Blanc is more complex though because it also includes Shelley's Hymn to Intellectual Beauty in its assessment. As in Mont Blanc she notes that there is a constant tension in the Hymn between celebrating what is there and being dissatisfied with it. This tension manifests itself in questions which 'implicitly require another voice to answer,'<sup>207</sup> leaving the poet dissatisfied with the very thing he celebrates. Unlike in Mont Blanc, Shelley explicitly rejects revealed religion in the Hymn, but otherwise the pattern is similar. He opposes the sublime voice because it too closely approximates that of religion and appropriates it for himself. Shelley's 'grateful embrace' of the sublime means, Leighton admits, that he never experiences it. Having accepted that, Shelley is still faced with problems – problems that ensue with his proleptic abortion of the experience. As Leighton reminds us, Shelley remarks in his essay 'On Life' that 'there is a spirit within... at enmity and dissolution.' This divisive spirit – at enmity even with the atheist tones discernible in the poem – I think explains the schizophrenic nature of Shelley's imagery.<sup>208</sup>

Leighton is no doubt right in asserting that Shelley's deity in Mont Blanc is not strictly the God of Christianity – certainly the allusions to storm and pain could be associated with that of Zoroastrian mythology. Shelley is a highly syncretic thinker. She also notes that though Shelley is at pains to avoid the 'vulgar mistake' of personification, it is nonetheless central to Mont Blanc. Again, this agrees with the spirit of opposition she observes in the poem as a whole. Personification does occur in the poem *de facto* because of his practice of allowing abstractions to govern active verbs.<sup>209</sup> This is Shelley's brilliant (or fatal) compromise between strict personification, making the mountain 'a debased kind of God,' and addressing the landscape as a 'possible sign of some greater Power which the poet desires

<sup>206</sup> John L. McKenzie. 'The Word of God in the Old Testament.' (1960). 205.

<sup>207</sup> Leighton. *op. cit.* 54.

<sup>208</sup> There is a noticeable strain of the Gnostic account of two equivalent and warring forces that runs throughout Shelley's thought. It is addressed in more detail below by James Rieger.

<sup>209</sup> Donald Davie. Purity of Diction in English Verse. (1967). 38.

to realise as a voice.’(61) The dynamics of the theory of poetry, the issue that primarily concerns Leighton, revolves around the fact that ‘composition still desires to recover the fullness of inspiration, which is the lost Power of its own writing.’ Thus she reads his poem as the pursuit of the source of a poetic power that is analogous to a power in nature.

I agree with Leighton that Shelley’s ‘philosophical concerns are yoked to aesthetic concerns.’ I differ from her though in seeing both to be a product of his idea of God, inherent in his choice of *topos* and presentation of an organic model of creativity in stead of the typical notion of God as maker. This seems to me the obvious conclusion of her own observations:

In *Mont Blanc* he confronts the landscape of religious conversion, he describes an autobiographical experience of awe, fear and enlightenment and he uses the language of exalted and personifying address. He too is writing a kind of hymn or ode to the genius of the place. However, unlike Coleridge, Shelley questions the model within which he writes and, as a result, the language of ‘Mont Blanc’ comments anxiously on its own workings. (62)

For this reason, Shelley’s mental journey moves from the introductory stanza, encapsulating a neat ‘agnostic epistemology’ ‘in time and terminology somewhat out of step with the rest of the poem’ (63) to a landscape which ‘traditionally compels speculation about first causes, and, in spite of his atheism, Shelley’s questions are also teleological.’(67) Here I think Leighton slightly misconstrues the issue, for surely it is *because* of his atheism that his questions are teleological. If they were not teleological, they might be agnostic. Does this show us the impossibility of avoiding intention in a poem, even one that would be agnostic? Perhaps.

Various subtleties in the poem prevent such a simple interpretation though and bring Leighton to describe a process similar to that of Wasserman and Ferguson of contradictory impulses: we can observe the poet’s attempt to make nature’s voice his, yet also the persistent concern (which is actually not a concern, but a presupposition) ‘that there might be no voice there to precede and to authenticate his own’(69); we can note a pervasive sense of threat, while the god (or Power) still remains unknown, distant and indifferent; we can record the language to be characteristic of the Lucretian gods,<sup>210</sup> while also noting a protest against a personalised and familiar God at the end of the poem etc.. Leighton claims that in Shelley’s final and famous lines,

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind’s imaginations  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

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<sup>210</sup> Timothy Webb. *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*. (1977). 39.

he 'neither affirms nor disproves the nature of his object.' This is true. However, in the gap left by the fact that affirmation and refutation are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive of one another and her claim that Shelley's last question is 'an aesthetic one,' the 'presence' which Shelley submits to the universal power of his doubts is never really engaged. Though Shelley can, as Leighton suggests, 'imagine 'thou' or nothing' (72), this can merely aestheticise the entire issue: the truth of the matter is that he can only choose to imagine either conclusion because his existence and free will allow him to do so. If he chooses not to, the possibility exists beyond his choice, despite what he implies. This is again the irony of Mont Blanc.

### iii) Jerrold E. Hogle

Jerrold E. Hogle's reading is decidedly different from Leighton's and Ferguson's as it takes a stance less interested in the formal aesthetic or 'epistemological' issues in the poem, though it acknowledges them, than in the 'extrinsic' tenor of its thought, its political and social radicalism. This manifests itself in this poem through a process which Hogle, citing Derrida, refers to as a subversion of a 'metaphysics of presence.'<sup>211</sup> This subversion, often manifesting itself elsewhere in Shelley's writing as revolution, could even be seen as the unifying theme of Shelley's thought, Hogle suggests, transcending the unity of this particular poem.<sup>212</sup> As he states elsewhere:

There is... an unsettling logic in Shelley's succession of words whenever he describes poetic composition *and* poetic conception as metaphoric. At every "center" of Shelley's poetics, no matter where we place the "essences" of his thought, we find him being forced to reveal a prior performance of shifts that is never an essence of any sort and keeps decentering itself forever.<sup>213</sup>

This unsettling logic certainly seems to be a characteristic of Shelley's poetry that all the critics can agree upon.

But of the three critics reviewed thus far, Hogle seems to be the least aware of the difficulties inherent in Shelley's poetic process. He, like the other critics, assumes no essential difference to lie between things and thought. But in his eagerness to display the consequences of that character of Shelley's philosophy he not only entirely avoids the question of whether this belief is even valid, he also calls for the 'consequences' of the

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<sup>211</sup> Jerrold Hogle. 'Shelley as Revisionist: Power and Belief in *Mont Blanc*.' The New Shelley. (1991). 110.

<sup>212</sup> This is the focus of Timothy Clark's Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley. (1989).

demonstrated truths of 'Shelley's poetry' to be borne out in criticism. This is because he recognises that the organicist reading practice is fundamentally an attack on the notion of causality and he seeks to avoid those notions, even when attempting to understand what the author intended. This leads him to an anachronistic hermeneutic practice which, as Anne Mellor describes it, eschews poetic qualities at the expense of a wholly allegorical style of reading allusion.<sup>214</sup> The credo of universal relativism is fervently presented by Hogle in this critique. Since he finds *stylistic* opposition to absolutes or unities in *Mont Blanc*, the *arguments* Shelley presents must, he suggests, at least be equally valid – all perspectives being equal where truth is contingent on a universal subjective state of transcendence. Shelley's self-defeating style constitutes for him an argument of significance, but not in the context of its significance.<sup>215</sup>

This is precisely the import of his question at the end of his chapter in which he asks whether we will interpret Shelley to be 'as genuinely revolutionary and revisionist as he claimed to be.' If we will, then he submits we must conclude that the poem's ending entails that both perception and language admit of transcendence. Hogle treats Shelley's use of allusion pointedly and translates it seamlessly into the quasi-Freudian terms of 'subliminal transference.' He asks the rhetorical question to the critics who prevaricate and demonstrate their reluctance to seize upon the obvious 'Nietzschean' significance of Shelley's demonstration:

Will we see that there is no vacancy and that there is a relationship to be celebrated between mountains, valleys, stars and seas because there is always already a subliminal transference in the way we perceive and in the methods by which language helps 'create' such thoughts-about-thoughts? (127)

Quite against his intentions, Hogle I think not only misconstrues Shelley, he offers a demonstration of the real difficulty of a basic equation of things and thoughts according to a prejudice against all prejudice. A lack of intellectual rigour leads him not only to complacency, but to a curious form of authoritarianism: no conclusion can be drawn from Shelley's demonstration except that we ought to rejoice that there is no vacancy.

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<sup>213</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle. 'Shelley's Poetics: The Power as Metaphor.' *Keats-Shelley Journal*. (1982) 159-97. 166-67.

<sup>214</sup> Anne K. Mellor. *English Romantic Irony*. (1980).

<sup>215</sup> Timothy Clark makes a critique of Hogle similar to my own in his article in *Evaluating Shelley*: ...modern employments of Romantic-Ironic method are anachronistic in a limiting sense and disturbingly self-justifying, since they finally affirm, not transcendental subjectivity (a philosophical option probably closed to us), but merely reading and rereading themselves as an open-ended process. (94)

This difficulty is only multiplied when we observe that his equation of thoughts and things has a different orientation than Shelley's. In other words, his own prejudices lead him to a different conclusion than Shelley made by deconstructing prejudices. Shelley's use of allusion to the transcendence of the mountain lauded by his Romantic predecessors entails first implicitly adopting their premises about it in order to question them latterly. He does not equate things and thoughts in the undifferentiated 'allegorical manner' Hogle does. Shelley rejects their conclusions, but remains wholly dependent upon the reader's understanding of a fixed literary topos to do so. This dependence on the tenor of its allusion is the inevitable consequence of allusive language that an 'allegorical reading' claims not to exist, or defers *ad infinitum*. A critique such as Hogle's is only being blind to the hermeneutic issues it raises and seems to me to 'celebrate' the aporia of incomprehensibility. According to him, Shelley wishes simply to demonstrate what he calls the 'subliminal transumptive process'(112), and release the transformative energy that the hierarchical unity imposed on it in Wordsworth and Coleridge's later poetry 'enslaves.'

However, the tenor of the poem will not support such a reading. The different 'voices' that are heard in Mont Blanc do not speak as unequivocally in favour of democracy (or what Hogle in fact argues for, equivocacy) as he would have them speak. In fact, it is far more plausible to hear a call for a true prophetic voice in the poem against the pretensions of the false prophet, represented by the voice of the mountain. It is only confusing as such because Shelley's 'prophetic' voice is not calling for a return to one God, but to gods. I shall explore this in more detail shortly. In general, Hogle is correct that all the things that speak in the poem have the same status in so far as they are all as 'merely nominal' as the 'existence of distinct individual minds' were to Shelley. Nonetheless, we can observe in the poem that these 'nominal' voices tend to conform to the character of one of two definable types. There are the dualistic 'voices' his fellow-critics have detected, for which the idea of truth ultimately has no value, which utter themselves from a 'democratic perspective' and vanish (e.g. his river Arve) and there is a 'Voice' that asserts its authority and remains as an assertion of 'objective' truth and is thus branded tyrannical. It contains 'large codes of fraud and woe.' In Mont Blanc his symbolic icy mountain undoubtedly has this Voice. That Voice and its apparent Power is challenged and subverted. Shelley's primary means of subverting the 'form of power' of the mountain-tyrant in Mont Blanc is by referring to the silence of its voice, insinuating that it would say nothing were it not given something to say by one such as him.

Hogle suggests that his critique is radically different than the other critics he mentions and the two I have reviewed here. These critics have tended to put Shelley in the context of

the sublime tradition or to read him as a poet-philosopher of epistemology. Hogle's Shelley is essentially an iconoclast. Hogle believes that the fundamental aim of Shelley's writing is to question the basis of any unified objective system of value. However, Hogle confuses unity with uniformity. As we have already seen, the particular form and significance of that system is really what is at issue for Shelley, not the unity. Shelley's questioning is unified in its objection but not uniform in its means of doing so. It is certainly this lack of uniformity that makes a uniform intention difficult to ascribe to him, but Hogle confuses the vehicles of Shelley's metaphor with their tenor. This sort of careless 'allegorisation' characterises his understanding of the words Shelley employs in the poem as well. The tripartite analogy of transcendence to vacancy to silence, all three representing various senses of negation of a formal sense of a 'presence,' admits the conflation Hogle suggests without sensual contradiction. However, Shelley's subtle allusion of transcendence to vacancy to silence cannot be reduced to one of the three, i.e. transcendence as he suggests. If it could, then it should be possible to reduce the three to any of the three terms indiscriminately. (They could entail, for instance the vacancy that Hogle explicitly rejects). However, they are not, as Hogle takes them to be, synonymous. Nor are they used with the one allegorical intent he suggests. Silence does not entail transcendence (and particularly not a 'subliminal transumptive process'), though it is a trope for it and it is one that can be manipulated equally to connote a presence or an absence without contradiction. Shelley's Mont Blanc is not as unequivocal as Hogle would wish it to be. He fails to grasp this because he even more radically confuses the vehicle of metaphor with its tenor and the form of an argument with its sense than Ferguson and the other critics who have followed Wasserman have done.

He is not however entirely incorrect in sensing that Shelley alludes to Wordsworth and Coleridge's symbols in order to attack the 'the service of monotheistic religions, social hierarchies centred on one dictating figure or class, and German idealism positing internal and eternal Absolutes' (108) that have implicitly been adopted in their poetry (even if the attack he sees on German idealism is surely anachronistic). In this way, Shelley's poetry is more consistent with its philosophical aim:

Not content with simply performing a transfer among images that his predecessors do not attempt themselves, Shelley draws their conceptions back towards what he thinks has made those notions possible initially, a centreless and non-Christian metaphysic – with a particular sense of language – which both his precursors depend upon yet refuse to acknowledge. (115)

Hogle's emphasis on Shelley's iconoclasm brings out aspects of his poetry that have been neglected by the many critics who have more or less accepted a shift in a 'metaphysics of presence' to the subject. If this shift in the 'location of presence' has taken place, then how do these critics account for the fact that subjects differ in their perceptions say of truth or

beauty without severing them from 'presence?' Without some sort of reference to a reality outside of the self, language does threaten to descend into rhetoric. How can it then be maintained that this 'subjective transcendence' is the same kind that was held to be universally valid in the theocentric, objective and metaphysical framework? It must be of this kind to have such a 'presence.'

If it is not of this kind, then unless we judge that the claims of authority lose their credibility with the subjective shift of Romantic hermeneutics, Hogle's conclusion seems ineluctable, that this presence, both before and after the subjective shift, is only a rhetorical figure, a simple incidence of transference of 'thoughts-relating-to-thoughts':

Transference is the 'cause' behind constructions of causality, in other words, being itself 'the secret strength of things/ Which governs thought', and Shelley releases that fact from its repression in Wordsworth, Coleridge and others by making that energy the 'Power', thereby overthrowing any idea of a Oneness which can be viewed as commanding all transformations from a position completely beyond them. (118)

Again, the issues are not as simple as Hogle presents them. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley also emphasises unity, 'the view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy,' and his is a unity of the processes of life in man and the universe conceived in organic terms. Shelley's unity, it seems to me, is informed by the Enlightenment 'prejudice against prejudice,' adopted radically as an attack on the notion of causation. It is the organicism it adopts in its place that leads to the aporia – but Hogle has mistakenly embraced such terms as a general and ineluctable problem of thinking.

Leaving aside the hermeneutic problems inherent in Hogle's position, it is also far from clear that his eclectic mixture of Freud, Derrida and political correctness meets, as he argues, the spirit of Shelley's argument in Mont Blanc. For one thing, Shelley's suggests in the poem that the power that is there in the mountain is not one that is available to one and all, not even to all 'democratic humanists,' but only to those whom he, like Wordsworth, calls 'poets':

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (80-83)

For this reason, aside from Hogle's notes on the anarchic tenor of Shelley's thought and his greater willingness to seize on its extra-aesthetic dimensions, Ferguson and Leighton come closer to presenting a reading compatible with Shelley's intentions.



iv) James Rieger

James Rieger's critique of Mont Blanc takes a different perspective on the issue of form and content than the previous three critics. He presents a helpful study marked by the characteristics of enlightened liberal scholarship. The central issue for him in Shelley's writing as a whole and his chief 'heresy' (unsurprisingly for a scholar informed by the values of the Enlightenment) is his obscurantism, which he declares enters the main tradition of English verse with Shelley. Obscurity poses a great problem for the reader and the critic, he observes, because it requires us to decide *how* it is that we are *to understand* it. Shall it be 'condemned as crankiness, a mental tic, a fraudulent impulse that can only lead to fake art?'<sup>216</sup> Whatever we decide, he insists it must be confronted directly. Since it presents itself to us as an 'accomplished fact,' Shelley's obscurantism must be 'dealt with pragmatically,' he asserts, because 'the use of words is at all events a moral enterprise.' However, having first proclaimed the moral duty of the critic with some intrepidity, he then hedges his remarks. The moral impulses and rational beliefs of the scholar are harried and cajoled by his supervening prejudice against intolerance and prescriptive criteria of judgement.

The pitched battle between the two takes place within the short space of a few pages of his introduction. On the one hand, he suggests that the blind eye of polite tolerance is not an option for the critic. There is no point in simply pretending that obscurity 'is not there' in Shelley's poetry and prose. 'The question of obscurantism, like that of sincerity, is one of intention and regards dead men, not living poems. We have been too well bred to address it. Yet it must be addressed, for it gapes wide and is itself obscure in the history of poetic practice.'<sup>16</sup> How then does Rieger suggest that we confront obscurity, if he insists we must? By taking, as Coleridge had suggested, the truth, which is 'its own light and evidence, discovering at once itself and falsehood'<sup>217</sup> Apparently not. Far worse than blindly ignoring the moral imperative to confront the issue would be to seize *that* alternative and 'to post signs warning of an open fallacy.' The designation of fallacy as such, he says, 'is surely the giddiness of dogma.' What then are we left with? Apparently with one of two options: we can revert to seeking the dead man's intention – an exercise that he had just dismissed as an exercise of mere politeness – since we have, he submits, 'no standard of appraisal but the successful dissolution of privateness, genuine or affected, into the poem itself';<sup>218</sup> or we can

<sup>216</sup> James Rieger. The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley. (1967). 15.

<sup>217</sup> Biographia Literaria. XVIII, 218.

<sup>218</sup> It would be interesting to pursue the link between the *intentional fallacy* and the frequently expressed view of poetry as 'a successful dissolution of *privateness*' he presents in light of what I have observed about the decline of objective truth and the *sensus communis*, but it passes beyond my remit to do so here.

avail ourselves of the comfort of the critic's own probity in asking after the poet's good intentions and trust in his ability to determine whether a poem 'has been honestly or dishonestly inspired.' (16) It is either Scylla or Charybdis then. The vigilant and muscular critic is hamstrung before he reaches the first hurdle.

This hermeneutic and ethical ambivalence, demanding critical action and accountability yet taking umbrage in an unsubstantiated claim of moral authority, hangs over a very promising book. Rieger's study provides illuminating research into Shelley's little acknowledged interest in the 'obscene creation myths of the Gnostic and dualist Christian heresies' and it demonstrates that they attain frequent expression in the symbols in his poetry. Nonetheless, despite his interest in Shelley's obscurity, he only touches on the hermeneutic implications that vexed the other three critics about this issue, and cannot really answer them. Nor does he really even attempt to engage with hermeneutic issues as such. He works on borrowed arguments and stands on the opposite side of the Enlightenment/ Romanticist divide with regard to the formal component of truth to the other critics I have reviewed. He contends that because it is a poem and has *formal* qualities, Shelley's Mont Blanc ought not to be subject to the sort of criticism rather befitting an ontological discourse. His rationale for this is based on his notion of truth, which has no formal (or formative) prejudices. The deep truth is not only imageless for Shelley, but Rieger as well. It is for this reason that he contests formalist readings of Mont Blanc such as Wasserman's that suggest that it is an 'epistemological poem.' In an effort to combat Wasserman's formalist and 'Platonic' reading of Shelley, he appeals to Plato's doctrine of the transcendent forms and argues that:

because it is after all a poem and not an ontological discourse, "Mont Blanc" remains in the realm of *eikasia*, not *episteme*. The dialectic it develops is one of tropes, not categories.' (90)

This marks a retreat to the staid Enlightenment argument that it is not so much that poets lie as that they cannot tell the truth. Their art does not make semantic claims. It is primarily an aesthetic act.

Had his book not predated the other critics I have reviewed by some decades, he could be believed to be arguing a point of view similar to theirs with regard to language, i.e. that Shelley's use of images that deconstruct themselves function to question its very status. There is a significant difference of course. Deconstructionist critics doubt the testimony of *all language* to claim ontological presence, because they observe in *formal* 'poetic language' its tendency to deconstruct itself in an analogous way to the manner in which Empiricist sceptics had observed the failure of the senses to deliver absolute certainty. Seeing language as a whole, deconstructionists would assert that poetic language is not the special case of language

that Rieger claims. Poetry reveals simply more readily than other forms of language the tendency all language has to remain 'in the realm of *eikasia*, not *episteme*.' The *aporia* of obscurity is, they argue, inherent in language. Despite his emphasis on the overarching heresy of Shelley's obscurity, Rieger obviously intends to argue no such thing about poetic language. He simply contends, I think, that prosaic language has less of an impediment to truth because it is less *formalised* (and therefore less 'prejudiced'). Obvious formalism in language demonstrates a different use for language than making claims of truth.<sup>219</sup> The intention of poetic language is not to reveal truth, but at best to allude to it, much as Plato's particulars signify the truth of the Forms by their forms. Form, in other words, prejudices the intention of language away from revealing the truth and toward another end, e.g. evoking immediate pleasure perhaps.

His claim that allusion is an inherently *deceptive* practice and that more prosaic forms of discourse have greater ontological validity cannot bear scrutiny of course. As we have already seen in the chapters discussing hermeneutics, formal and formative prejudices cannot be dispensed with in any use of language. However, I think that the observations that he makes can be construed far differently. The figurative quality of poetic language need not be interpreted to signify the absence of meaning in language. In fact, had Rieger acknowledged that prejudices are a necessary component of all forms of thinking, he might have drawn a different conclusion about the fact that *tropic uses* of language require more explicit acknowledgement by the reader of their form in order to comprehend their meaning. These very formalities could be taken to demonstrate the necessity that the reader commit a *performative act* to achieve meaning, requiring that he has (already acquired) the capacity to do so and will exercise good faith in using that capacity. This would reconnect the performer to the notion of a *sensus communis* conveyed by language and an inculcated ethics of interpretation. The conclusion of course could not be restricted to formal uses of language. All language requires such a working knowledge in order to be used and understood and all language can be used to reveal or to deceive. But figurative language demonstrates the necessity of ethical performance in a much more obvious way than do the more prosaic uses of language.

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<sup>219</sup> 'Wherever Shelley abandons the descriptive-meditative mode for abstract reflection in 'Mont Blanc,' he becomes hard to understand. The poem's cruxes testify to its technical immaturity; as discourse, it is not so well written as prose. But the criterion is irrelevant, not to say philistine. The basic linguistic unit of poetry, including the 'poetry of statement,' is the metaphor, as the category is that of philosophy. The obscurities in 'Mont Blanc' are not examples of a confused metaphysics; they are simply weak figures.' (107-08).

If he had acknowledged these aspects of language, he might also have been led to a far different conclusion about the evidence his book relates of Shelley's adoption of explicit heresies. He might have made a *causal* connection between the prejudicial implications of these heresies (if he followed their logic through consistently enough) and the obscurity in Shelley's writing. As it is, he claims the obscurity only stems from the fact that Shelley's allusions are unfamiliar. But he could have drawn the more obvious 'dogmatic' conclusion that Shelley's poetry is obscure because it *performed* its logic according to a *heretical sensus communis* informed by specious philosophy and a compatible theology, e.g. Gnosticism, Lucretian atomism or a form of dualism.

This is what his own research suggests. He observes what he calls three forms of heresy in Shelley's writing, which range from being formal heresies to being informal, as it were the effects of these formal heresies.<sup>220</sup> The first and the most seminal of these pertains to Shelley's heterodox use of aspects of 'magic, hagiology, and obscene creation myths of the Gnostic and dualist Christian heresies' in many of his major symbols. The second is related to Shelley's depiction of God's relationship to the world and its immanence or transcendence. This, on a less explicitly theological level, is the very matter that preoccupies the deconstructionists and modern critical debates about 'presence' in language. This observation about Shelley's treatment of the issue of divine transcendence also relates to the question of (poetic) language, Rieger explains, as it 'doubts the possibility of metaphor. Poets like to think they prophesy, but are their utterances ontologically trustworthy?'<sup>221</sup> A deconstructionist would simply answer in the negative because of the lack of presence in the text whatever the mode of expression. Thirdly, there is the issue I have already discussed at some length, that of Shelley's obscurantism. According to Rieger, it 'embraces the other two.'<sup>222</sup>

However, the first group of heresies in particular observes a different dynamic than does the last, which most easily lends itself to the rationalist (and poststructuralist) terms of 'linguistic approximations of the absolute.' This first group of heresies implicitly acknowledges, by offering an alternative theological presentation, a doctrinal framework of

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<sup>220</sup> To see this point, it is required to think causally. The question is, what formal presupposition could lead to the conclusion that immanence and transcendence, things and thoughts were essentially indistinguishable? The answer might be that there was an atomic explanation for the binary oppositions in nature. This can be traced back again to Lucretian atomism or various Gnostic interpretations. Of course, it is actually the effect of Cartesian universality, the discrediting of the senses, that first led Shelley to trace these heresies backwards to formal causes that would also destabilise the *sensus communis*. But in *Mont Blanc* he demonstrates in organic terms the reciprocity of the two directions of heresy – from formal heresy to obscurity and from obscurity to formal heresy.

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.* 14.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.* 15.

truth with a particular story and terminology, which Shelley has seized upon to deviate from the prevailing orthodoxy. This was a common theme in Shelley's writing on theological matters. For example, in his 'Essay on Christianity,' Shelley describes God as 'the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things,' and 'the overruling Spirit of the collective energy of the moral and material world'<sup>223</sup> – in other words as if divine agency were the sum total of all organic forms of activity. This bears remarkable similarity to his definition of Love that was explored in more detail previously. Shelley's reference to Lucretian and Gnostic gods in Mont Blanc, which are quite amenable to this notion of conflicting forces, are nonetheless of a different order than his equally heretical claim of the absence of God.

This has another dimension. The characteristic perspective of the Biblical writings, the orthodoxy against which Shelley presents his heretical perspective, is not readily amenable to his suggestion that the authors, the prophets, were presenting such subjective impressions of transcendent divinity:

...the word God according to acceptance of Jesus Christ unites all the attributes which these denominations contain, and is the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things. It is important to observe that the author of the Christian system had a conception widely differing from the gross imaginations of the vulgar relatively to the ruling Power of the Universe.<sup>224</sup>

On the contrary the prophets have the collective burden of acting as an *amanuensis* for God, which entails that they too possess some of his personal characteristics, as presented in descriptions of him as the Creator, the Lover, the Good Shepherd and the Father. The main point is to note a different type of theological claim and to object to its conflation with another: the truth of divine revelation can be accepted or rejected, but it cannot be reduced to Shelley's organicist notions of inspiration. This idea has been inculcated by the prejudices of such a model of thinking without acknowledgement as such. But the organicist notions of artistry do not predate Hume's radical attack on causality in his An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding in 1751. Causality (and the notion of God as Maker) is a crucial element of both Classical and Biblical thinking. It is an anachronistic prejudice of Shelley (and those follow him in interpreting according to the Romantic hermeneutic paradigm) to foist the metanarrative of organicism on the past. It is a violation that has not gained legitimacy by its repetition.

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<sup>223</sup> 'On Christianity.' The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ed. E.B. Murray (1993). 251.

<sup>224</sup> 'On Christianity.' ibid. 250.

Furthermore, understanding language as blank counters for spiritual energy to imbue can only lead to the conclusion that Shelley drew – that words are as atoms that can be rearranged *to be a story*, in fact any story, in and of themselves. This is precisely what his use of the word *silence* in Mont Blanc connotes. The word *silence* is a microcosm of the macrocosmic story he narrates through his performed epistemology and allusion to a Deist topos. Its illegitimacy has been argued by Maurice Blanchot, who has pithily observed the great failing of organicism. Since the poetic has become everything (in the eclipse of the two-world view, it must be added) in Romanticism it has become nothing: ‘neither in the world nor outside the world; master of everything, but on condition that the whole contain nothing; pure consciousness without content, a pure speech that can say nothing. A situation in which failure and success are in strict reciprocity, fortune and misfortune indiscernible.’<sup>225</sup> In this sense, Rieger is correct in suggesting that Shelley’s use of obscurity embraces his other two heresies, because it *informs* his decision to embrace the conclusion that these heresies entail.

When Rieger claims that obscurity embraces the other two heresies, he yokes two apparently compatible but very different arguments together. The first ‘heresy’ he cites, the collective doctrinal deviations from orthodoxy, actually refers to a tradition that lends understanding rather than simply defying it through the suggestion of obscurity. In so far as the allusions that Shelley uses refer to a tradition that did not attempt ‘to approximate absence,’ but rather claimed divine revelation, Shelley’s poetic license can indeed be regarded as heretical in the dogmatic sense that neither he nor Rieger acknowledges. The common ground between the ‘Romantic’ and the Biblical perspectives, the fact that God is transcendent and therefore inexpressible as an ‘object’ is one of accident (and only apparent congruence). When Shelley *misuses* this language it is not because he ‘fails to approximate his object.’ It is because he intentionally refigures the allusion to be one of approximation. Like Rieger, Shelley mistakenly conflates this to amount to a *de facto* refutation, as it then becomes susceptible to the sceptical premises of the first point. His use of figurative language has no object then because it is neither based on divine revelation nor on any empirical reality. His judgement of his own language is true, but it does not bear upon the orthodox claims of language.

### *Alternative interpretations of heresy*

Rieger need not have reverted back to an Enlightenment explanation of Shelley’s heresy. The obscurity that resulted from Shelley’s organicist prejudices could have been

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<sup>225</sup> Maurice Blanchot. The Infinite Conversation. (1993). 356.

interpreted to demonstrate the necessity of a monotheistic framework of creation for a credible theory of human perception and a coherent process of understanding. For Shelley's poetics and philosophy, by the very *consistency* with which he used not only heretical figures and images, but also employed a *commensurately* heretical grammar (attacking the logical integrity of the sense of personal agency in language) presents a superb demonstration of the intellectual necessity of theological orthodoxy. Divine agency is the cornerstone that guarantees human agency is not just a practically useful concept: it is crucial for understanding human understanding. The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from Shelley's consistent poetic application of his heretical theological and philosophical convictions is that it resulted in obscurity *because* it employed their *false prejudices*. This is however a point that emerges rather despite Rieger's evident Enlightenment prejudice in deciding the 'heresy of obscurity' to be the greatest of Shelley's heresies, and *the one that embraces the others*.

As he has presented it, Rieger only recapitulates an Enlightenment fallacy about *poetic language* because he applies the criteria of universality, the prejudice against prejudice. But he could have argued in his demonstration of Shelley's explicit and prolonged interest in *heretical doctrine* that allusive language is *truthful* (which is the substance of the entire 'Platonic' discussion for himself, Wasserman, and the other critics) in so far as it reflects upon the truth of *orthodox* dogma. The tenor of such a claim, I admit, immediately conjures up ideas (inculcated by the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice') of a complete abrogation of critical responsibility or an absurd Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith.' But true faith is not blind in the way this description suggests. On the contrary, a blind leap of faith, as Kierkegaard presented it, is only a product of the fact that he had brought the principle of Cartesian universal doubt into the very heart of revealed religion. Beginning from the position of doubt, it is suggested, the believer 'leaps' into faith. This is not what I am suggesting. That is a position as hermeneutically absurd as it is unorthodox. Orthodox belief is grounded *primarily* on a faith, however hesitantly it is grasped, in God as he has revealed himself in acts recorded in the language of the Holy Scriptures. It is not faith leapt upon from the idea that there must be a transcendent source of all that is immanent – though that may be a fine idea – or the idea that if God did not exist, men would have to create him for moral and social reasons – that regards the issue *subjectively*, by looking at humanity in a glass as it were. That invokes a process of deduction that can only lead to verifiable opinion, not truth.

A more sympathetic reading of Rieger's restriction of the language of poetry to the realm of *eikasia* could interpret it in a different spirit than simply as a remark on ontological quality in poetic language. He might be referring to the poet's different *intention* in ordering

his language in a tropic manner. It is an issue of style, not substance; or if it is substance, then it is ultimately of substance gained through allusion, not through meaning provided *spontaneously* of its own accord as the organicist model suggests. He implies that the prospective intention of using allusive poetic language, quite apart from the hermeneutic question of recovering authorial intention to which it is so commonly related, does not and cannot succeed or fail by being demonstrated true or false as a philosophical argument could be. It fails first and foremost by failing to have moved the reader or auditor. And it fails to move the reader most comprehensively by being *incomprehensible*. In Mont Blanc, this incomprehensibility is propagated by the confusion of agency with activity.

Rieger would probably have found the suggestion of more recent critics that Shelley's use of tropes 'questioned the status of language in general' to be as specious as he found Wasserman's claims for their ontological truth to be questionable. At best, these critical interpretations based themselves on the organicist model's failure to acknowledge the primary intention of poetry *as poetry* to evoke pleasure. What sounds like a hermeneutic argument on Rieger's part was doubtless not intended as such. It was a simple remark that poetic form is a wholly secondary issue in the matter of truth (or 'ontology' as Wasserman preferred to formulate it more 'Platonically').

His simple remark however leads to a rather more startling conclusion about the recent role of criticism in poetic interpretation. If studies of Shelley's use of language have caused the truth-claims that the New Critics attempted to establish in 'poetic language' to 'deconstruct,' then he would suggest it was the attempt to establish 'intrinsic form' as a truth-claim (as a microcosm of a purely self-reflexive Romantic hermeneutics) that was misguided, not Shelley's use of contradictory or self-defeating allusions per se. Having said that, the similarity between the New Critics' argument about truth-content of poetic form and Shelley's use of obscurity in his poetic form as an expression of content would subject his poetry to the same judgement. This is precisely what Rieger *almost* argues in his critique of Shelley, that his truth-claims were heretical and thus fell flat in artistic representation. But he makes the conclusion of the Enlightenment thinker in Gadamer's sense. It is not that poets lie, it is that they cannot tell the truth because they refer to imaginative constructs.



2. *The 'play within the play' – Organicism within the Deist topos*

I

The everlasting universe of things  
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
 Now dark —now glittering— now reflecting gloom—  
 Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
 The source of human thought its tribute brings  
 Of waters, — with a sound but half its own.

Mont Blanc begins with a skilful presentation of a potted epistemology reflecting Shelley's organicist intellectual philosophy. Simultaneously, its first six lines act as a sort of proleptic gloss to introduce the poem's themes and as a hermeneutic paradigm to explain its use of metaphor thereafter. Form and content are linked on various levels throughout the poem. It will probably be useful to give a more careful exegesis of these first six lines and a cursory mention of the issues they raise before embarking on a broader treatment of the poem. In particular, I would like to contrast the terms and connotations he establishes in the first six lines, which form the pattern of describing the universe as an interplay of organic forces for most of the poem, with the very different terms and connotations that the ending presents: a challenge to the idea of God as the Maker of the universe. These demonstrate how Shelley attempted in Mont Blanc to assert a claim for the poet as conductor of Power by depicting 'God' as the sum total of natural forces, dependent upon him for his expression. God was merely a modification of one active, vital force that was involved in all human creative ventures: 'all the inventive arts maintain, as it were, a sympathetic connection between each other, being no more than various expressions of one internal power, modified by different circumstances, either of an individual, or of society.'<sup>226</sup> It is not my *primary* intention to provide a 'close reading' of all the various nuances of the poem or to recover the author's intention in writing it. Rather, I wish to demonstrate the workings of Shelley's hermeneutic presuppositions in the poem and to question their validity. This will go beyond merely arguing for their admitted 'aesthetic failure' in order to explore somewhat more deeply what Leavis meant when he charged Shelley to have a 'weak grasp on the actual.'

The opening lines of the poem offer us a step in this direction by confronting us with immediate *logical* problems. In a curious introduction for a poem composed on the subject of 'Mont Blanc,' we are presented with a *universe* that 'flows through the mind,' a universe that is 'everlasting' and 'of things.' A number of questions are raised by these descriptions: If the universe is of things, how come they do not perish as things do? And if they are things, how can they be *in* the mind? Even if it is because these things are the equivalent of thoughts, how can they be everlasting? If it is *everything* that is in the mind, how can it be a mind as we

understand it as a *personal* attribute that *cogitates* and *designates* and, most importantly, subjects to *understanding*? And if the relationships between mind and universe are as co-extensive as this suggests, does this not collapse any distinctive sense that the word 'mind' has together with 'the everlasting universe' so as to make both words meaningless?

The answer to these questions, it would seem, is that it is possible for these qualities to exist in conjunction because they adhere to something like the Cartesian concept of mind and, more specifically, its capacity to *doubt universally* according to the Cartesian formula: *dubito ergo sum*.<sup>227</sup> This premise of universal doubt is the basis of the 'universal perspective' that Heidegger and his successors regarded as characteristic of Cartesian-derived subjectivity. It is the thread of philosophical scepticism that runs through Shelley's writing.<sup>228</sup> If, as this presentation suggests, no true distinctions are in the mind except the ones originating in its very act of self-reference (true external distinctions having been erased by universal doubt), then no true contradictions can be either. The use of paradox without true distinctions in the first six lines establishes the dominant *logical process* that characterises the first four stanzas of the poem.

Nonetheless, this mind is not wholly sundered from the world of appearances as the Cartesian model is. It contains a reciprocity to the 'external world' that obeys the biological laws of the organism, ingesting and in a sense becoming *informed* by what it metabolises. The words he uses accordingly allude to their conventional meanings, but are altered by being 'metabolised' – much as we observed earlier with his idiosyncratic definition of 'love' – and according to its terms. They are not slight adjustments. An entire perspectival change is at work, with concomitant philosophical and, as befits his chosen Deist topos, theological implications. For Shelley presents us in *Mont Blanc* with an organic theological model, which only fails to appear dogmatic because it eschews the inferences of causality that are normally associated with dogmatism.

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<sup>226</sup> James A. Notopoulos. *The Platonism of Shelley*. (1949). 404.

<sup>227</sup> Shelley uses the definite article in referring to 'the mind.' Either he means the mind generically (as in the mind of everyone who has one) or some sort of more unified and transcendent sense e.g. 'Mind,' the source of that generation. I think he refers to both senses indiscriminately. This is a reading similar, but not the same as Wasserman's distinction of two senses of mind in this poem – Universal Mind and the 'individual human mind.' Not only is that reading too Platonic, it is also too differentiated for the sort of ambiguity Shelley employs here. Shelley wants to introduce notions of creation and creativity in his poem whereas Plato did not in his theory of the ideal forms and their particulars.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Pulos. *op. cit.* (1954); T.A. Hoagwood. *Skepticism and Ideology*. (1988).

Anne Mellor's 'ironic' reading of this tendency in Romantic poetry as a whole is based on the same set of observations as my own. She describes the same sort of theological premises of organicism to inform the practices of Shelley and his contemporaries:

The artist who shares this conception of the universe as chaos must find an aesthetic mode that sustains this ontological reality, this never-ending becoming. Clearly, he cannot merely impose a man-made form or system upon this chaos: that would distort motion into stasis. Instead, the Romantic ironist must begin skeptically. He must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness and of all man-made structures or myths. But even as he denies the absolute validity of his own perceptions and structuring conceptions of the universe, even as he consciously deconstructs his mystifications of the self and the world, he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas. Thus the romantic ironist sustains his participation in a creative process that extends beyond the limits of his own mind. He deconstructs his own texts in the expectation that such deconstruction is a way of keeping in contact with a greater creative power. (4-5)

Nonetheless, an 'ironic reading' of Shelley seems to me to have several shortcomings, as valid as the observations it makes are. Firstly, having acknowledged the *theological* significance of the universal view to the subsequent train of thoughts, it tends to ignore it thereafter in the name of exploring its *effects*. Secondly, it seems somewhat historically inaccurate to suggest that such a project was his: Shelley was not influenced by the German Romantic Ironists,<sup>229</sup> while he was directly influenced by the biological thinking that had compatible tendencies, such as that of Erasmus Darwin. Thirdly, the topos of this poem and many of the others that Shelley wrote deal with issues that are more or less explicitly theological. Issues that affect anthropology, as organicism does, are far more influential there than those of literary speculation *per se*. Finally, this idea of Romantic irony commits the reader to understanding the entire poem as an explicit display of such a practice – as an 'organic work.' I think that this poem however clearly moves away from such a stance in the final stanza.

Irony is however a self-legitimizing postulate that can justify itself in either a 'closed' or in an 'open' ending, so it seems hopeless to argue with critics committed to such a perspective. Such a practice of reading seems to me to be *committed* to being *uncritical* – to the position of the critic as the 'unprejudiced conductor' of the 'power' of poetry. It recognises the symptoms of the problem, but refuses to make any sort of diagnosis of the form of the disease it confronts (to use Shelley's metaphor). It wallows in the *aporia* of organicism. Like the deconstructive practice Mellor goes on to criticise, ironic readings take

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<sup>229</sup> He was of course influenced by Coleridge though, who was. However I think it significant in that respect that Coleridge does not take to Friedrich Schlegel as we might have expected him to if Coleridge's organicism had observed the same dynamic as Schlegel's. I don't think it does, but it has transcended the limits of this thesis to discuss that.

poems of the Romantic age out of their context in intellectual history and absolutise the tendencies they identify in Mont Blanc, as if demonstration were argument.

If we are not to understand it only as a *display* of Romantic irony, one way of understanding the effect of this 'organic epistemology' is to compare the 'mind' to which he refers to the transcendent 'mind' of God, for whom, being omniscient, there is no past, present or future and for whom *speech* is action. This comparison brings into sharper perspective the change he proposes for the notion of human language. It takes us to the heart of Shelley's heretical presentation in the poem, the shift from regarding speech as the quintessential divine attribute to regarding silent thought as such. This is how the poem concludes, with the silent mountain being challenged by the thinking poet for its impotent *silence*. It is an ironic practice, for it is only his own organic theological conception derived from Cartesian universality that suggests the primacy of *thought* (rather than words) to the *human mind*. It leads him to assume that such a relation also captures the essence of God's relationship to the universe. Agency, like language in the poem, is in the state of metabolic process and it is clear to Shelley that even if God is not there, some vital and unifying force is.

This is not the orthodox account of either God or man that Shelley represents however. The Genesis Creation accounts, as previously mentioned, emphasise the indelible link between the creative power of a 'transcendent' God and his use of *language*.<sup>230</sup> By God's acts of speech all that is comes into being. Language (and in particular the *spoken* word) is thus the orthodox theological basis of understanding God's *relationship* to his creation and, since man is created in God's image, it is a basis that has a wide range of implications for human relationships and understanding too. Speech, in both Classical and Biblical understanding, is the primary basis of communication and the repository of common sense, as well as the means by which an agent discloses himself and 'appears' in the world to others. These are issues that have been averred to earlier in the second and third chapters and need not be delved into more deeply here. With this shift to understanding the *primary human* attribute to be *thought* in the mind – which is far less 'worldly' than are spoken, revelatory words – it is instructive to note how Shelley deviates from orthodoxy and, in particular, how his heresy, his 'choice of opinion,' effects the notions of *agency* and *relationships* connected to the being of God and, by implication, the relationships connected to human being. The heretical, organicist understanding of 'love' and of 'life' was addressed

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<sup>230</sup> Cf. Genesis and the Christological import of the Word given by John 1. Ideas and connotations of transcendence and immanence are actually a product of the Enlightenment response to Cartesian universality and one must be wary of adhering to them too faithfully.

earlier in the chapter, as was the change in emphasis they reflected from seeing man and his relationships in terms of agency to the terms of processes.

Heresy of the sort Shelley begets here by presenting *agency* and even the objective world in terms of *natural actions* could probably most naturally be attributed to having *removed* the primary power of agency from the concept of God, in defiance of his orthodox conception as a Maker. This is certainly a correct understanding of the *effect* of the presentation. But a more historical understanding of the intellectual *spirit* of Shelley's heresy can be gained if we realise that an *additional*, absolute character has been falsely attributed to God that an orthodox account would not have had. In line with his operative 'prejudice against prejudice,' derived from Hume and others, Shelley's 'divine mind' has the *added power* of transcending the prejudices of language and formal agency as well. Shelley's identification of God with a silent and inexpressible form of ideal power seems to fulfil the category of the sublime, from which the topos of his poem is inseparable, but it is crucially different:

The sublime, as Kant explains it, is...programmatically ambivalent: it demands simultaneous identification with and dissociation from images of ideal power. Unless the subject in some degree identifies with the ideal, the experience reduces to mere pretense. But total identification collapses the distinction between ideal and empirical agency and leads to a condition of 'rational raving' that Kant designated 'fanaticism.'<sup>231</sup>

One of the great difficulties created in Mont Blanc by Shelley's ambivalent 'personification' according to his organicist philosophical-theological premise of the 'one mind' is that it leads him into the sort of 'rational raving' Kant describes.

But it does so in a way that Kant had doubtless never envisaged – as a collapse of the idea of the distinctive agency of God (and, by implication, of human beings) altogether. In Mont Blanc, Shelley never dissociates himself from the image of an agent of ideal power – as would have suited a presentation of the sublime – because it would have been a redundant act. He had never *acted* to identify with it to begin with. Organic identification was his basic epistemological and theological postulate, not the action he took as a distinct agent confronting another. The 'everlasting universe of things/ Flows through the mind' of the divine, whose 'secret springs' are 'the source of human thought.' [My representation of this in more explicitly 'personal' terms of course fails to capture the ambiguity in which Shelley clothes these organic relations] In this ambiguity we can see a degree of consistency in Shelley's philosophy far beyond the 'prejudice against prejudice' that Kant employed so

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<sup>231</sup> Steven Knapp. Personification and the Sublime. (1985). 3.

rigorously: a prejudice against the basic distinction of agency as such. Shelley's prejudice towards the notion of God was that he should be entirely without any formal or personal characteristics – an organic, spiritual thing like a thought *infusing* the material world, an idea which he says is part of the teaching of Jesus Christ:

He is neither the Proteus or the Pan of the material world. But the word God according to the acceptance of Jesus Christ unites all the attributes which these denominations contain, and is the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things.<sup>232</sup>

The addition of this 'transcendent attribute' to divinity, i.e. its lack of formal agency however has the effect of obviating the *logical* sense in which God relates to the world as its *author*. The peculiar transcendence his mind presents in lacking a distinction between things and thought also brings it to implicitly deny the distinction between *essence* and *existence*, i.e. what Coleridge calls the 'superinduction of reality' in the latter.<sup>233</sup> Both senses are placed indiscriminately within the realm of *silent thoughts* and, in the process, are thereby removed from the *sensus communis*, from *personal* communication and from the effect of history. All thoughts are treated, as it were, as mathematical equations, existing in theory, but bearing no *true* (or distinctive) correspondence in reality. This apparently minor change from speech to thought has enormous repercussions: in presenting the relationship of the transcendent God to the world according to the terms in which he understands his own *thought*, i.e. purely (self-)relationally, Shelley removes the *nominative power* of language as a characteristic of God. This removes the characteristic means by which God expresses his dominion over creation, a relationship that reflects creation's dependence on him and also confirms the real distinction between him (and the creatures made in his image) and creation. It is this that leads Shelley to the second heresy that Rieger noted, the removal of any true difference between the ideas of divine transcendence and immanence. The removal of the distinction between the two is betrayed in the natural images Shelley uses. Not only do they tend to suggest evanescence and 'unremitting interchange'(39), they suggest mystery and 'secret chasms.'(122)

Shelley's attack on the connection between language and the notion of agency could (and ultimately does) result in the hermeneutic *aporia*. In fact, it would not be incorrect to state that the *aporia* is the immediate effect of having removed the superinduction of reality that distinguishes thought from things, the characteristic 'weakness' of Shelley's imagery. Indeed this *aporia* is exemplified by the disorientated and disorienting series of images that

<sup>232</sup> 'On Christianity.' *op.cit.* Ed. E.B. Murray. (1993). 250.

<sup>233</sup> *BL*. XVIII, 204. The difference between essence and existence is made clear by the example Coleridge offers: 'Thus we speak of the essence and the essential properties of a circle; but we do not therefore assert that any thing which really exists is mathematically circular.' This distinction between essence and existence is one that Shelley's organic postulates ignore.

characterise the first four stanzas of the poem. Incomprehensibility or, as Rieger rightly describes it, *obscurity* is the result of Shelley's attempt to sever the prejudicial character of agency from language (and indeed from all manner of sources) in these images.<sup>234</sup> Without that natural grammatical sense of agency, language is truly incomprehensible. For words do indeed have a particular and 'exclusive sense,' despite Shelley's dogmatic contention to the contrary, which already effect an inherent *sensus communis* and framework of agency in their connotations and terms of reference. Neglecting this exclusive and prejudicial sense produces nothing but obscurity, and of course it alters the natural relationships of mankind to things and to his fellow man.

In so far as this practice of subverting agency characterises the majority of Mont Blanc, the poem could be understood as a demonstration of the *intellectual philosophy*. In the first four stanzas of the poem, he largely portrays the mountain as a nonanthropomorphic, amoral *power* and the other natural forces as lesser instances of somewhat the same.<sup>235</sup> This is typical of his 'rational raving' and depicts, in the background of the broad canvas of a landscape painting as it were, the consequences of his heretical grammatic/ syntactic relations. However, in the conclusion, Shelley directs his attack on divine *logocentricity* into the conventional form of personal address. This shift to intimate terms of personal address suggests that he relates to the mountain much as a human agent would relate to a personification. Coming at the conclusion of a poem in which repeated disorientation has been established its standard of reference, the switch to more conventional terms of reference shocks the reader in a way that perhaps no poem, with the possible exception of Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn, can be said to emulate. The intention of this shift is consonant with the motivation for depicting divine *agency* in terms of natural *actions*, but it shifts its line of attack in order to assert, in conventional *language*, his *dominion* over the *silent* 'mountain':

–Winds contend

Silently there, and heap the snow with breath  
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home  
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes  
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods

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<sup>234</sup> 'The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of – how little we know.' ('On Life,' 478).

<sup>235</sup> There are of course exceptions to this practice of avoiding anthropomorphism that add clarity to the picture, such as his reference to the communicants at the mountain's Holy Mass:

Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,  
Children of elder time, in whose devotion  
The chainless winds still come and ever came  
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging  
To hear – an old and solemn harmony; (II, 20-24)

Over the snow. The secret strength of things  
 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
 Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!  
 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
 If to the human mind's imaginings  
 Silence and solitude were vacancy? (V, 134-44)

In that conclusion, he finally asserts what he had demonstrated throughout: his is the claim of the speaking Creator against a silent pretender. However this sudden reversal into comprehensibility questions, if nothing had before, the validity of his own linguistic usage until that point in the poem. Indeed, one must question whether the poem would not have been altogether incomprehensible *without* such an orientation.

Once the play of the theological and philosophical postulates (and their connotations and implications) are recognised in Mont Blanc, I think Shelley's intentions are as clear as his use of language is ambiguous. He wants to claim for 'human thought' transcendence of the traditional *limitations* upon human expression, limitations inherent in the prejudice of human agency and language, but he also wants to gainsay that there is something other than the human (and particularly a higher agent). However he needs to *allude* to a supernatural being in order to present his own claims as a Creator. The ideological and philosophical integrity with which Shelley adhered to the organic model of life unfortunately lead him to lose artistic authenticity in this poem, since there can be no ambiguity where distinctions between subject and object have been *a priori* removed. His use of allusion only presents us, on an intellectual level, with a more oblique manner of opposition, opposition being a tacit acceptance of the same premises and reversal of the judgement upon them. The one possible way of reading Mont Blanc that would escape this censure would be to read it as a strict parody, but unfortunately that seems an impossible reading – that would require Shelley accept what he most certainly did not.<sup>236</sup>

What does seem most likely is that this is a genuine attempt at presenting an artistic model of a wholly natural anthropology – with universal, dualist and Gnostic allusions – as a counter-claim to those normally associated with the Deist topos. In other words, Mont Blanc not only functions as a poem acting as a *window* into Shelley's psycho-linguistic processes – as more 'formalist' or epistemological readings have rightly emphasised – it is also a *mirror* reflecting the theological and philosophical convictions he had. But I think this is where the emphasis of a critique of the poem ought to lie, not in transcendence as such or in the linguistic relations of the poem. They are removed both from reality and from the

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<sup>236</sup> The use of parody is however what I shall contest Keats employed in his Ode on a Grecian Urn.



conventional prejudices of the tradition in which Shelley wrote. It has a more logical rationale as well: given the intellectual necessity of prejudices that Heidegger and Gadamer have demonstrated, it is most correct to see Shelley's practice as demonstrating the prejudicial effect of heretical postulates rather than, as it is usually presented by structuralist understandings of language, as an interplay of allegedly endemic linguistic failings to lay hold of 'presence.' *Mont Blanc* primarily displays Shelley's attempt to give a poetic account of human creativity independent of a metaphysics and in particular of a dogmatic theological, i.e. *logocentric* expression.

One final manner in which I would like to trace this attack on formal agency is by observing how Shelley treats *origins* in the poem. The collapse of the distinction between the ideal and the empirical in his inspirited universe takes place most obviously in the collapse of the distinction between things and 'human thought,' reflecting the collapse between the universe and the human mind. However, there is within that postulated unity and change also a duality of light and darkness to be noted that interact in a complementary fashion, 'Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—/ Now reflecting splendour...' (3-4). Similar logical problems to those at the poem's outset continue as we are also presented with the idea that human thought might not just be, but have a *source*. This suggestion contains the same ambivalence. 'The source of human thought' (5) comes from 'secret springs,' simultaneously hinting at and concealing its origin or cause, a suggestion that is further confused by the fact that their sound is 'but half its own.' (6)

Presumably this source is also *within* the everlasting universe of the mind if all things and thoughts are in it. But if it is the source of thought and is within mind, then there is also a difference between the two, but if the mind is everything, how can it have a source of everything within it that is not either the source of mind or mind of it? It is impossible to picture in one's mind precisely what Shelley envisages – and that of course is the intention. One must have adopted the same spirit and the same philosophical theology as the artist in order to sympathise with it.

At root, these repeated gaps in Shelley's logic, like those at the poem's outset, are poetic expressions of the 'spontaneity' at the centre of all rationalist philosophical frameworks. Shelley simply decentres and thus removes the inherent hierarchy of the original Kantian sense of spontaneity. In line with this decentring, it is also unclear where the sound he refers to issues from. It could be the tribute, but it could also be the source. Most likely it lies in the logical antipode to the mountain however:

In the still cave of the witch Poesy,

Seeking among the shadows that pass by  
 Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
 Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
 From which they fled recalls them, thou art there! (II, 44-48)

We can probably assume that the antagonists of darkness and light are also each half responsible for the sound. There is every reason to think that sound has an analogy with light here and therefore we have little difficulty seeing some sort of alignment by Shelley to a dualistic Manichean or Gnostic view of creation combined with his sceptical framework. Alternatively, it could relate to the Lucretian atomism that Jerrold Hogle and Hugh Roberts have seen to inform Shelley's presentation.<sup>237</sup>

However, Mont Blanc is concerned with alluding to and yet concealing origins throughout. Shelley frequently uses dream-sequences in his poetry to avoid the idea of fixed locations or natural causes. This is again the case in Section III of the poem, <sup>where,</sup> perhaps alluding to Milton's reference to the source of his inspiration in Paradise Lost, the Holy Spirit, the 'celestial patroness, who deigns/ Her nightly visitation unimplored,/ And dictates to me slumbering',<sup>238</sup> the poet begins (again) with such an allusive dream vision. It rejects the Christian view of resurrection in favour of a less certain suggestion:

Some say that gleams of a remoter world  
 Visit the soul in sleep, – that death is slumber,  
 And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber  
 Of those who wake and live. – I look on high;  
 Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled  
 The veil of life and death? or do I lie  
 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep  
 Spread far around and inaccessibly  
 Its circles? (III, 49-57)

Leslie Brisman suggests that this dream sequence acts as a buffer 'between the overwhelming presence at the end of section II ("Thou art there!") and 'Mont Blanc appears – still, snowy, and serene–' (63).<sup>239</sup> The shadowy connection of the two certainties however only intensifies his quest for the origin he seeks, and it leads him to speculate on yet another possible place:

Is this the scene  
 Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young  
 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea  
 Of fire envelop once this silent snow? (III, 71-74)

The silence that greets this question – for 'None can reply – all seems eternal now'(75) becomes the ground of possibility of an answer that will only be given at the poem's end:

<sup>237</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle. The New Shelley. (1991). 115. Hugh Roberts. op. cit. (1997)

<sup>238</sup> John Milton. Paradise Lost. IX, 21-23.

<sup>239</sup> Leslie Brisman. Romantic Origins. (1978). 147.

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
 So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
 But for such faith with nature reconciled,  
 Thou hast a *voice*, great Mountain, to repeal  
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
 Interpret, or *make felt*, or *deeply feel*. (III, 76-83)

Shelley's organicist postulates, in their refusal to attach themselves to a notion of causality or an idea of agency, do conform in the end to the Wordsworthian idea of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' feelings Shelley could sense welling so deeply within him when beholding the sublime landscape of Mont Blanc. And he, like Wordsworth, thought that these feelings, when held within the premises of the organicist framework, could 'repeal' the 'large codes of fraud and woe' that he attributed to be implicit in the ideas of agency and, consequently, of discriminatory hierarchy. These feelings are the 'voice' of poetry that speaks in Mont Blanc – even when confronting the 'Deist' idea that the mountain speaks in the end. But even this final confrontation has set up a straw man to be knocked down – Deism posits no voice in the mountain either, but rather in the sense of grandeur that comes from the *failure* of the *senses* to comprehend its immensity. Shelley's opposition to the Deist premises was thus less consistent than he presented it as. His was in fact merely an evolved model of the same unorthodox theology. But what Shelley's incapacity to present his ideas comprehensibly demonstrates, in the very poem that is designed to embody them, is that they are misconceived. They are caught up, in their organicist premises, in a recurrent crisis of self-legitimation.

*ODE ON A GRECIAN URN (1820 version)*

1.

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
 For ever piping songs for ever new;  
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
 For ever panting, and for ever young;  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
 What little town by river or sea shore,  
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
 When old age shall this generation waste,  
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"--that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

## Chapter Five – Keats's eternal urn

### *Introduction*

The final chapter of this thesis examines the topic of silence and the crisis of self-legitimation that emerges in Keats's parody of Enlightenment values of art in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' He does so by confronting an object d'art, the fixed product of a maker, from the contrary 'Romantic perspective' of life and its processes. The ode has a peculiar place in the canon of English literature. It has been used as a touchstone for the legitimacy of the various schools of literary criticism that have emerged since the time of the Second World War. I will examine a few examples of these approaches at the end of the chapter, which in a sense concludes the thesis on the same sorts of issues it had started on: the hermeneutic *aporia* that has emerged in interpretation. I have argued that this is a product of the shift from the age-old understanding of creativity in terms of causality, for which the artistic model was that of the maker (or *homo faber*), to a more organic one that understands creativity as a function of 'life,' and thus presents it in terms of biological life-processes, with miraculous beginnings and uncertain ends, as befits the artistic model of life of the *animal laborans*.

The critical response to the ode has hinted at such a change in the model of activity, but not openly avowed it. The questions posed time and time again by critics in regard to the ode centre around its conclusion: whether Keats agreed with it, whether it was a demonstration of artistic control or a loss of it, whether he intended it to be acceptable to his readers and, if so, under what conditions it should be considered legitimate. In terms of the poem's basic structure, one can reasonably conclude that it is legitimate because the conclusion provides a definitive answer to the constitutive trope of the ode, interrogation.<sup>240</sup> On the other hand, that judgement is questioned by the ode's paradoxical *themes*. Indeed it has been argued that the disillusionment and frustration that result from the speaker's questioning are wholly at odds with the certainty of the conclusion.<sup>241</sup> The disjuncture of form and content has made the ode a topic of much critical discussion. The fact that the conclusion appears at odds with the rest of the poem has forced critics to expose their theoretical underpinnings and hermeneutic assumptions. The ode's formal incoherence has invited the application of a different hermeneutic of reading than would have been warranted if the poem had been more transparent to understanding, as it would have been had it been

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<sup>240</sup> Helen Vendler. *The Odes of John Keats*. Harvard: Belnap P., 1983. 118.

<sup>241</sup> It is not only the rest of the poem with which the conclusion is at odds. As Walter Jackson Bate notes, 'in even the most spontaneous letters of a year and a half before (and we are significantly forced to go back that far in order to find remarks at all analogous), Keats never comes to anything as bald as the simple equation of these two abstractions, "beauty" and "truth," that he permits the urn to make

intended as a determined 'work of art.' However, it was written by a poet who conceived his poetic activity not in the conventional terms of a maker but rather as a mediator of life. Thus it appears as a 'work in progress,' an understanding of the activity based on the metabolic processes of life.

This aspect of the poem has not gone unnoticed by critics. An emphasis on the autonomy of the text, that is its resistance to a fixed determination of meaning (whether as a purpose or an end), marks all the 'formalist critics' I refer to in the section of the chapter dealing with their responses to the ode. The standard reading must broadly tend toward a 'Romantic view' (for lack of a better term) which regards the conclusion as a poetic defence of the centripetal power of poetry to draw opposites, even antitheses into organic unity. The most famous and enduring of such readings is presented by Cleanth Brooks in The Well-Wrought Urn (1947). It is perhaps a measure of the influence of I.A. Richards's 'practical' criticism that the perspective of the American New Critics of the 1940s, of which Brooks is a prime representative, has been taken as an accurate representation of this unifying character of 'Romantic' thought by the critical tradition. Richards, while proceeding along Utilitarian lines in books such as the Principles of Literary Criticism (1924) and Science and Poetry (1926) came to the Arnoldian conclusion (following the German Romantic writers and Coleridge)<sup>242</sup> that the *kind* of truth furnished by poetry is analogous to that formerly provided by religion, i.e. one which mediates life and a means of leading it.

If this is claimed to be poetry's proper merit and especial province, then it follows (as the New Critics insisted) that individual poems 'must not mean but be.' For if poems *mean*, they signify an end that the poems do not themselves embody – they can be designated as the products of design. This emphasis on the *being* of a poem tries to avoid the problem it sees in traditional accounts of a poem as a *work* of art, the 'intentional fallacy,' i.e. the notion of causality that would accompany the model of art as the product of the poet working as the *homo faber*. For this model entails that poetry can never truly provide significance of its own accord: it might mean something that has already been fixed and determined, but it can never be truly *meaningful* in and of itself. And the New Critics and their successors are determined to see poetry as a demonstration of an organic unity that would in some sense be desecrated by such an 'extrinsic' determination. The practical ramification of such a view is the New Critics' insistence on a practice of criticism that emphasises the self-contained and

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here (least of all does he advance anything seriously comparable to the words that follow).' John Keats. Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, (1967) 517.

<sup>242</sup> As I have argued though, the fact that he thereby misinterprets Coleridge's appeal to the truth of the imaginative work is connected to his belief in the Bible's revealed truth about the workings of the human mind.

indeterminate nature of the literary text, frequently known in practice as 'close reading.' This assumption of the literary text's self-containedness is certainly axiomatic, but it is logically consistent with the view of poetry as a particular source of truth, a view which undoubtedly can be traced to the nascent stages of a philosophy of life in the early nineteenth century. This development was prepared by the Romantics themselves, whose poetics emphasised, as David Simpson notes, 'self-finding and self-creation, with the consequent disestablishment of the text as an authority and the stressing of its function as a heuristic stimulus.'<sup>243</sup> This 'heuristic stimulus,' which Keats called 'the greeting of the spirit,' was always a precondition that the Romantics set for the reader to understand their poetry.

However, even the 'heuristic stimulus' presented by the form of textual obscurity entails considerations that cannot be reduced, as the New Critics would have it, to the text's 'being.' This is revealed by the peculiar emphasis the Romantics placed on the importance that the reader share a *lived* process of thought with them, an issue which formalist accounts tend to overlook in their exclusive emphasis on the text.<sup>244</sup> This sort of hermeneutic imperative, the 'shared life' of the 'sympathetic imagination,' which we have seen so strongly emphasised in Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, is not always as readily associated with Keats. He does however fall into the same pattern. He betrays a similar understanding, for instance, in a letter to Reynolds: 'Axioms of philosophy are not axioms until we have felt them on the pulses... We read fine — things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.'<sup>245</sup> Not only must a poem *be*, Keats suggests, the reader must also come in a manner to identify *spiritually* (and we might now say *existentially*) with the author. For the reader also must not mean, i.e. find a fixed purpose in the poem, but *be with*

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<sup>243</sup> David Simpson. *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979. 26.

<sup>244</sup> Simpson argues for a similar desire on both Kant and Hegel's behalf, 27-29, though also notes important differences. See Coleridge's discussion of Kant in *Coleridge: The Philosophical Lectures, 1818-19*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. 388-90.

<sup>245</sup> 'To JH Reynolds.' 3 May, 1818. This sentiment is what one would expect from a poet who stressed the importance of the experience of a 'World of Pains and trouble' to the development of what he called an 'identity' or 'soul' from its beginning as a mere 'intelligence' or 'spark of the divinity.' By means of the 'hornbook' or 'Minds Bible,' which he calls the *human heart*, the intelligence is made through suffering into a soul, making the world of pains and trouble a '*Vale of soul-making*.' ('To the George Keatses,' 14 Feb-3 May 1819). The human heart is the formal animus of existence, and therefore must in some sense be coeval with human life as Keats sees it. What is worth noting though is that, in order to avoid that notion of causality (the notion of a divine Maker), he also attempts to deny the existence of the person (heart) prior to its activity in forming the intelligence. Thus he can claim, when discussing the issue of the Salvation of Children who die in infancy, that his system (unlike those which posit existence upon worldly appearance) does not affront 'Our reason and humanity' because, 'in them the Spark or intelligence returns to God *without any identity*.' (my italics) This appeal to something simultaneously prior to and more meaningful than experience and yet still inseparable from it is the sort of intellectual crisis of self-legitimation that is at the very heart of Keats's philosophy of life.

the 'spark of intelligence' that lies in it. The 'negative capability' that he so highly prized in Shakespeare was also an attribute of his ideal reader.

The 'existential' precondition of all *knowledge*, which in Coleridge referred explicitly to a life informed by Christian belief, can thus be just as readily observed in Wordsworth, Shelley or Keats in their calls for the reader to share 'the same spirit as the artist,' even though their understanding of 'life' and the 'spirit' differed from Coleridge's:

In order to have an efficient belief in Christianity a man must have been a Christian, and this is seeming *argumentum in circulo* incident to all spiritual truths, to every subject not presentable under the forms of time and space, as long as we attempt to master by the reflex acts of the understanding what we can only know by the act of becoming. (BL, Conclusion, 287).

The difference of course can be traced to the crisis of self-legitimation inherent in the new biological model of creativity – the poet is in a state of symbiosis with his work, rather than being in a position of authority over it. The problem of relating the model of artistic activity to the processes of life alone was that life:

like the term stimulus in medicine; explaining every thing, it explains nothing; and above all, leaves itself unexplained. It is an excellent charm to enable a man to talk *about* and *about* any thing he likes, and to make himself and his hearers as wise as before... (whereas with poetry, as is the case with painting) the specific object of the present attempt is to enable the spectator to judge in the same spirit in which the Artist produced, or ought to have produced.<sup>246</sup>

In order to judge in the same spirit Coleridge thought that some explicit acknowledgement of design was requisite. It was not that he was averse to the model of becoming. It was the fact that it was inadequate on its own. He attributed life to a source that had a causal relationship to creation as well as a constant role in sustaining its evolution. As he said elsewhere, 'The model is nothing less than that of the redemptive act of Christ himself; He is become as we are, that we may become as He is.' For Coleridge, the reference to the infinite I AM gave him the artistic model of Creator and sustainer of all life, a combination lacking in his contemporaries' attempts to avoid the notion of causality. It was an attempt that made incomprehensibility as much a part of Romantic poetics as the *aporia* is a part of Romantic hermeneutics.

One of the great ironies of this grand attempt at avoiding fixed notions of design though is that an even more determined pattern was established: the pattern of necessity that it takes on from the life-forces it seeks to mediate. The Romantics' insistence on the reader's willingness to share life (or be 'sympathetic') as a precondition for understanding their poetry

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<sup>246</sup> Preliminary Essay. 'On The Principles of Genial Criticism' in *Biographia Literaria*, edited with his *Aesthetical Essays*. Ed. J. Shawcross. (1907). 222.



announces harmony with 'life' and the 'spirit' to be a crucial hermeneutic issue, consigning even formal textual considerations to secondary status. The text represents the body in which the poet's spirit had inhabited, a body to which only a certain type of reader's spirit will fit: a sympathetic one who will not pose questions that require an answer according to the model of cause-and-effect. This might be acceptable on such terms. However, the explicit requirement of a kindred spirit unravels the Enlightenment aim to achieve *unprejudiced* creative expression. For it entails that poetry has a purpose other than the artist's 'spontaneous' intention to create for creation's sake or, as it is usually expressed in terms more congenial to an attempt to avoid notions of causality, disinterestedly.

But no less vehement is the Romantic writers' insistence that the reader 'believe *in order* to understand' what they, the authors, are trying to say, than is Coleridge's insistence on the precondition of *Christian* belief as the terms of the primary imagination. Both parties acknowledge the truth of what Coleridge asserts in another essay:

...it is the nature of all disquisitions on matters of taste, that the reasoner must appeal for his very premises to facts of feeling and of inner sense, which all men do not possess, and which many, who do possess and even act upon them, yet have never reflectively adverted to, have never made them objects of a full and distinct consciousness. The geometrician refers to certain figures in space, and to the power of describing certain lines, which are intuitive to all men, as men; and therefore his demonstrations are throughout *compulsory*. The moralist and the philosophic critic lay claim to no *positive*, but only to a *conditional* necessity. It is not necessary, that A or B should judge *at all* concerning poetry; but *if* he does, in order to a just taste, such and such faculties *must have* been developed in his mind.<sup>247</sup>

The differences between Coleridge and the others are crucial of course, precisely because the terms of what needs to be believed differ (as does the locus and model of authority for creativity). Coleridge's deferral of the artist's *secondary*, if genuine creative powers to the Divine terms and conditions of the primary imagination that it repeated *in order to be deemed creative* was not shared by his contemporaries. On the contrary, much of what was written by Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats suggests that they regarded a reference to authorial intention, or the 'striving after fact and reason' to be an anathema to the true poet. This was Coleridge's great failing in Keats's eyes – he had the irritable habit of reaching for a ground of authority of 'fact or reason' beyond those given by the immediate responses of his being to beauty. Behind this objection we can probably note an objection to the two-world

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<sup>247</sup> Essay Second. *ibid.* (1907). 225. It is probably useful to refer to Coleridge's definition of taste here to avoid a misunderstanding. At the end of this essay he defines taste according to a *two-world understanding* as 'the intermediate faculty which connects the active with the passive powers of our nature, the intellect with the senses; and its appointed function is to elevate the *images* of the latter, while it realises the *ideas* of the former. We must therefore have learned what is peculiar to each, before we can understand that 'Third something,' which is formed by a harmony of both.' (227)

view that was no less an anathema to him. Keats maintained, on the contrary, in full agreement with Wordsworth and Shelley's emphasis on one world and one life, that such a doctrinal prejudice as Coleridge suggested was antithetical to his model of artistic creativity: 'The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation and watchfulness – That which is creative must create itself'<sup>248</sup> or, similarly, 'if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'<sup>249</sup> or 'almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel,' 'full of Symbols for his spiritual eye.'<sup>250</sup>

A firm belief that the Romantics' 'organic work' provided not only the 'heuristic stimulus' but also a *ground* of belief for the reader characterises both the New Critical and 'Romantic ironist' interpretations I discuss below. Deconstructive readings have emphasised, on the contrary, that the New Critics' attempt to provide a basis of meaning via pure self-referentiality can only ever result in an endless chain of signification without achieving a ground for their life – or 'being' as it is usually mistakenly called. This seems to me an accurate portrait of the dilemma of modern hermeneutics derived from the Romantic premises of one life, which does not affect Coleridge's claims in the way it does his contemporaries. His poetics was not *primarily* based on self-referentiality as theirs was, but on self-referentiality expressed secondarily *as identified* primarily in Christ and his foundational work in the schema of creation and salvation.

Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn focusses primarily around issues of temporality and its effect upon the truth of the spiritual life that Keats promoted as poetry's alternative to 'a Christian scheme of salvation' – 'a Vale of tears' he called it in opposition to his own 'Vale of soul-making.' The issue of temporality is the basis for the central antithesis in the ode: the contrast between the mutability of life and the eternity of art. The critical tradition, following or opposing the New Critics (and thus often implicitly adopting the same paradigm) has usually interpreted this antithesis in one of two contrary ways: either to uphold the transcendent, eternal values of the urn or to condemn them. These thematic approaches have been extrapolated to include the issue of whether or not Keats was an 'idealist' or a 'realist,' by which is meant whether he accepted or rejected transcendent values.<sup>251</sup> Scholarship on Keats, like that on Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley has often interpreted these terms of transcendence to be Kantian, i.e. as universality conforming to the mind's powers to think in

<sup>248</sup> 'To J.A. Hessey,' 8 October, 1818.

<sup>249</sup> 'To John Taylor,' 27 February, 1818. Of course, in this particular instance Keats is referring to the effect on the reader and not to the artist's disposition.

<sup>250</sup> 'To J.H. Reynolds,' 19 February, 1818.

terms of space and time. In one sense they are. They are represented intellectually by the urn's deathless eternity as an attribute of universality. But the emotional life of the urn's beholder, to which the urn is at best a dissatisfactory source of comfort, suggests a far more *vital sense* of spirituality in Keats than such an abstract sense can warrant. My reading shall suggest that this idealistic versus realistic paradigm is a false one.<sup>252</sup> The response of the artist of 'life' to a 'dead' objet d'art is far more in evidence in the ode.

We must also keep in mind certain general facts about the ode and its critical reception: that Keats published the ode originally in The Annals of the Fine Arts; that the descriptions of some of the depictions on the urn bear an incontrovertable similarity to Haydon's description of the figures on 'Raphael's Cartoons at Lyaestra'; that Keats would have had, like his intellectual mentor Hazlitt, a distaste for the facility of the pictorialist type of thought and claims to a dead form of eternity presented by Haydon's art and of Christianity stripped of humanity by Deistic thought; the fact the ode concludes with the sort of clear statement that is as striking as it is entirely atypical of the rest of Keats's poetic corpus. All of these considerations have led me to the conclusion that the current readings of this ode are inadequate and do not meet Keats's poetic aim in this ode.

In general, the debate has taken on the quasi-theological dimensions implicit in such a distinction of realism and idealism, which are valid and useful to the issues surrounding the debate inherent in the themes, but confusing initially to a discussion of Keats's ode on a *Grecian* urn. To a greater or lesser extent, criticism in English literature has subsequently acted or reacted to the paradigm of the New Critics since the time of their criticism (a point I shall attempt to show), which was in turn a reaction to a crude and materialist understanding of reality and of the spiritual issues of the poem. Ironically, my conclusions shall show that the materialist and the utopian perspectives, the 'realists' and the 'idealists,' were identified by Keats as two sides of the same coin and dismissed as being inappropriate to man in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' This dismissal is inherent in the choice of relationships suggested

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<sup>251</sup> James O'Rourke. 'Persona and Voice in "Grecian Urn".' (Spring 1987): 27-48.

<sup>252</sup> It should be noted from the outset that this distinction does *not* connote a crass temporal/ eternal distinction as both still obviously occur within the context of finite time. This problem is well noted by O'Rourke when he states that:

Interpretations of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" which set the transience of life over against an art whose spatial form signifies the transcendence of temporality have no means of distinguishing between the spatial form of sculpture and the temporal nature of language.(31)

In other words, the ground of debate has been shifted by critics to a question which is *strictly* polarised – as if the spatiality of the urn did not admit to temporality. Admittedly this is the argument put forth by the urn and desired by the speaker, but it is a perspective which is undermined in the ode, not opposed or embraced outright. That the eternal is thereby *evoked* by the urn may be and has been held,

for the urn. Two relationships for the urn are emphasised from the poem's very beginning by the speaker (who reveals his sympathy to a Keatsian position on life), one corresponding to a bride and one corresponding to a foster-child. Both of these are *partnered* by a form of absence. In the former instance, it is that of quietness (which is usually named as silence in the poem), in the latter instance, it is that of 'slow time.' Significant by its absence though is another relationship. The absence of a reference to the urn's 'parent,' i.e. its author or maker, in the invocation at the outset of the ode facilitates the specious claims of an eternal perspective on the one hand and a philosophy of life (avoiding the purposive connotations of creation) on the other. This is emphasised by the otherwise strange reference to the urn as the 'foster-child of silence and slow time.'

This critical divide has been encouraged further (one could argue created) by the somewhat artificial controversy surrounding the ending. My reading suggests that the ode must be read within the context of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition and a specific manifestation of that tradition, that of ekphrastic writing. Both of these had undergone a transformation in the time preceding Keats as a result of the debate brought on by Lessing's response to Winckelmann which had, briefly summarised, distinguished the 'formal successiveness of poetry and the simultaneity of the visual arts.' As Roy Park points out, anti-pictorialist thinking, which can be considered broadly to follow the arguments of Lessing, underlies the thought of the English poets and critics of the Romantic period.<sup>253</sup> This view of Keats's contemporaries is key to understanding the opposite view presented by the urn itself and is shared, generally speaking, by the readers of and contributors to the *Annals of the Fine Arts* such as his friend Benjamin Haydon. Far from agreeing with the urn, Keats offers us a parody of the sort of logic such readers would use to justify the superiority of statuary to poetry, namely its silent eternity (adapting slightly, but importantly, Winckelmann's 'stille Größe.'). Although the speaker approaches the urn in the hope of attaining the sweeter music of eternity its tale offers, and re-asserts its sufficiency to man after it has 'spoken' to him, the frequent references to our mortality and the expression of desires left unrequited throughout the poem leave us little doubt that these final assurances are measured ones.

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but this too is a confusing, unhelpful and ultimately dangerous pretense, as Keats argued. The eternal can distract from the life of the present.

<sup>253</sup> Roy Park. *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*. (1971). 117.

## *The Form of the Poem*

Keats employs various formal means of intensifying the sense of the ode. The choice of the ode is of course itself the first aspect of the poem worth commenting on, if briefly. As Paul Fry notes in his The Poet's Calling in the English Ode:

In order to penetrate the strange logic of an ode, one needs especially to understand two figures of speech, invocation and prolepsis (or anticipation), and one figure of thought, irony – “for which,” as Kenneth Burke remarks, “we could substitute dialectic.”...Invocation, which is the motive of an ode, we may call a stubborn apostrophe, a purposeful calling in rather than a calling out...Dialectic motivates change, and invocation in theory could motivate constancy through change. But now enters the figure that thwarts change in all discourse...prolepsis. Prolepsis is the figure that forecloses a topic before it is fairly entered upon.(10-12)<sup>254</sup>

Though the catalytic figure of prolepsis is one that leads to *interpretatione*, ‘a repetition or amplification in other words’<sup>255</sup> and would very often be located, by definition, at the beginning of the ode, Fry notes along with Helen Vendler a structure of ‘experiential beginning’<sup>256</sup> in Keats’s odes, ‘a confused but arresting passage of special intensity somewhere in the middle of the poem that has seen further than was intended and repairs itself correctively, involutes or veils itself, in both the opening and closing phases of its argument.’<sup>257</sup> This observation shall prove particularly relevant to the discussion. For as Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes, ‘a principle of closure is available only when the dialectic process can be represented as internally resolved’ and this is not the case in Keats’s ode. The implications of this will have to be examined.

There are however other formal aspects of the ode which also contribute to the unresolved dialectic. Although the following categories are by no means exhaustive, critics have observed his use of certain stylistic devices. Some of these deserve closer examination:

- 1) *Dramatis personae*
- 2) Movement by the interrogator
- 3) Ekphrasis – the tradition and implications in light of the statuary-poetry debate

### *Dramatis personae?*

<sup>254</sup> For more on the tradition itself see Jochen Schmidt, Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens, 1. (1988), 202-23. On the archetypal reception of the ode in Romantic thought see for example J.G.Herder. “Von der Ode.” Frühe Schriften. (1985). 61. Fry’s entire introduction is a worthy summary of the central aspects and his distinction between hymn and ode is instructive.

<sup>255</sup> Richard Lanham. A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms. (1968). 60.

<sup>256</sup> Helen Vendler. ‘The Experiential Beginnings of Keats’s Odes.’ Studies in Romanticism 12 (1973): 591-606.

<sup>257</sup> Fry. op. cit. 13.

Most critics seem to be agreed that we are given a dramatic persona in the form of the 'speaker' in the ode,<sup>258</sup> whose presence becomes apparent when the poem's continuity is 'disrupted' by the oracular pronouncement of an obviously different 'voice,' the controlling persona of the urn, in the final stanza. The insertion of quotation marks indicating reported speech heightens this perception, regardless where they are placed. For some readers, among whom T.S. Eliot is the most famous, the change in tone at the end of the ode with the aphorism 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' is abrupt and a 'serious blemish on a beautiful poem.' Several other critics, however, some of whom I shall look at in the following, have sensed for various reasons that the flow of the poem is disrupted by pauses in the aesthetic experience throughout, making the final stanza less of a reversal than a fulfillment of its previous anticipations.<sup>259</sup> Just as with *Mont Blanc*, this seems to be reading more into the poem than its author intended. Nor must we accept the argument that the ode symbolises the 'creative process' uncritically. The process that the poem's speaker undergoes in his encounter with the urn may be creative, but whether it is intended to be approved of is another matter. We have just as much reason, if not more, to think that the ode's overdetermined closure reflects a type of thinking of which Keats strongly disapproved – it is after all what the urn, the 'cold Pastoral,' says. The apparent resolution of the interrogator's astonishment and mystification without any acceptable rationale for the reader can equally be regarded as an indication that something has happened in the interrogator's mind as a result of his viewing of the urn of which we should be wary. There is however a more compelling argument against this reading which I shall leave until my reading of the ode later in the chapter.

### *Movement*

One aspect of Keats's choice of subject-matter for his ode, which I believe has been overlooked in the desire of the cultural anthropologists acting as critics to find an historical object corresponding to Keats's urn, is the necessity that one would have to circle around an urn or rotate it to view it in its entirety. This aspect of an urn would make it advantageous to Keats, I think, for a simple reason: *movement* changes aesthetic experience in so far as it emphasises the process of *change*. Of course, we cannot see the observer moving around the urn, but there are obvious indications that he is doing so, such as the changing scenes he describes confronting him. Movement also requires time, the condition from which the urn appears exempt, to become a more obvious factor in the aesthetic experience. This is not to

<sup>258</sup> This began I believe with Cleanth Brooks's reading of the ode in his chapter on Keats in *The Well-wrought Urn* (1947).

<sup>259</sup> Such as David Simpson's reading in Chapter 1 of his *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (1979); or Barbara Jones Guetti's 'Resisting the Aesthetic.' (Spring 1987): 33-45. I shall discuss these two approaches in the following.

say that our actions occur outside of time, but rather that the temporality of the experience is being included as one of the primary elements we are to observe in relation to the 'silent eternity' of the urn. As William H. Race notes, Keats's ode presents a *recusatio* to the tradition of *ekphrastic* writing because he himself (or at least his thought) intrudes as much into the description of the object as does the actual object described. In many respects, the ode appears thereby to reflect the thinking process itself, which takes place in time and is known to us, but never makes an appearance in the world.

The process of circling around the urn might not seem sufficient to qualify as an 'action' by some accounts. However, the obvious emphasis on the passionate activity of the perceiver, reflected in the structure of the ode – the repeated, yet subtly different encounters with the urn, the deliberative pauses between stanzas and the strong reactions of the viewer – makes it clear that this 'lived' aspect of experiencing the urn as an art object was indeed what Keats had in mind when selecting an urn for this poem. Movement entails that the pure contemplation of the urn is interrupted by an activity that brings the experience out of its implied transcendence and *back* into a relation with the exigencies of mortal life. Along with that movement brings moral and mortal considerations in what may at first appear a strictly intellectual exercise. These are certainly concerns that beset Keats at the time, as is evident from his letters. All too often, Keats's moral concerns and sentiments have been divested from their artistic exposition in criticism. If poetry is to have the 'life-affirming power' which Keats thought it had, surely we must understand the action (and the concomitant temporality) in the poem as a central part of it.<sup>260</sup>

The change in 'scenes' in the stanzas is represented in the structure of the ode architectonically stanza by stanza. The final stanza is a response both to the musings of the previous stanza, which diverted the observer's gaze to something wholly mental and not on the urn, and to his contemplation of the base of the urn – that is, the part of the urn whereupon all the beauty stands and its 'apophthegm.'<sup>261</sup> The clarity of this apophthegm is completely at odds with the confusing array of sensations and reflections presented previously in the ode, though it does match the desire of the invoking voice. Though the unsettled feeling carries

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<sup>260</sup> Nancy M. Goslee presents several interesting accounts of the importance of stationing in Keats's poetry. See for example *Uriel's Eye: Miltonic Stationing and Statuary in Blake, Keats, and Shelley* (1985) or her article more specifically relevant to the odes, 'Phidian Lore: Sculpture and Personification in Keats's Odes.' (1982): 73-86. The aspect of movement, neglected in studies of this sort, is an important consideration however if one wishes to draw in the moral implications which Keats thought poetry had. Therein lies the link between aesthetics, reason and action that most other schools of criticism cannot account for.

<sup>261</sup> Which I believe to be the 'leaf-fringed legend', taking the last word literally, that Keats mentioned (proleptically) at the outset of the ode.

throughout the ode because of the pervasive paradox, it is of a different nature here. The poet has wholly given himself over to rationalising the urn's qualities to extend beyond itself. It thus becomes the quasi-transcendent being he greeted it as proleptically in the invocation.

*Ekphrasis – the tradition and implications in light of the statutory-poetry debate*

A final aspect of Keats's use of language in the ode that has been noted by many recent critics in specific connection with the visual arts is his use of *ekphrasis*. As critics since Ian Jack have pointed out,<sup>262</sup> Keats's response to the urn is generically defined, both in respect to his subject and the form of writing. *Ekphrasis* or *descriptio* is a *terminus technicus* referring to those passages in poetry in which a particular scene that has been depicted on an object by its original creator is described at length by the poet. The *locus classicus* for *ekphrasis* is the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad* 18.483-608. There have been several views taken by critics about the significance of the use of *ekphrasis* in modern descriptive writing. The implications of *ekphrasis* for a New Critical view of 'art about art' is explored most thoroughly in Murray Krieger's study, which claims that Keats's ode is in fact the *locus classicus* of ekphrastic poetry. He would have it that the plastic, spatial object of poetic imitation symbolises 'the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature's turning world to 'still' it.'<sup>263</sup> The arrest of life in art is what makes it 'classical.' It develops most fully the potential of the spatial form to represent the human conquest of time in 'the well-wrought, well-lighted place of aesthetics.'<sup>264</sup> A second view on *ekphrasis* tends primarily to see its significance in relation to the use and abuse of *power* inherent in the act of *naming* and determining meaning. A number of quasi-Freudian readings attribute symbolic significance to the practice of *ekphrasis*. Noting the images of ravishment and sexual tension in the poem, they argue that the use of *ekphrasis* is a typical eighteenth century form of poetry that represents the conquest of the world by the power of reason in general and the ravishment of the female 'object' by the eye of the male 'perceiver' in particular.<sup>265</sup>

Andrew Bennett sees *ekphrasis* in Romantic poetry as a step towards removing language as a *medium* between man and the world and embracing a more *sensual* (and true)

<sup>262</sup> Ian Jack. *Keats and the Mirror of Art*. (1967).

<sup>263</sup> Murray Krieger. *Ekphrasis: the illusion of the natural sign*. (1992). 265-66.

<sup>264</sup> James O'Rourke. *op. cit.* 29.

<sup>265</sup> Grant F. Scott's reading in *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis and the Visual Arts*. (1994) 119-150, an argument followed more perceptively by James A.W. Heffernan in his *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. (1993), who reads the conclusion of the ode as an apparent 'work of iconophilic homage' which, because we cannot know the urn except through Keats's



grasp of the material world by the human spirit. He notes that if Lessing was right in locating the difference between painting and poetry in the respective spatial/ temporal treatments of their subject-matter, then one way of producing the effect of the visual in writing is through imitating it in what he calls a 'grammar of the visual.' That is,

...instead of using the past tense, complex syntactical clauses and non-visual hypotheses, the poet can use the present tense, disdain conjunctions (the effect par excellence which language is able to claim over the visual arts is the assertion of cause and effect in narrative) and refer only to the visual aspects of the scene...<sup>266</sup>

Bennett suggests that this particular style of writing thus mimics the ability particular to painting to stop time. The power of ekphrastic poetry is such that it represents in words the ability of the sculptor/ artist to capture a fleeting moment eternally in marble. In this logical representation of sculpture, it emphasises the pathos of temporality, without which the plastic art would have no grounds for appeal to finite beings such as ourselves. This is consonant with Krieger's view. Bennett supports Krieger's point by emphasising that Keats's particular achievement in this ode is in creating an awareness of the inherent contradiction in praising a work of the plastic arts for its eternal perspective whilst simultaneously writing about it, suggesting the possibility that 'the poem itself is capable of capturing an eternal moment and affecting the reader in the same way as the 'eternal moment' of painting.'<sup>267</sup> Obviously, Keats's paratactic use of language questions the status of language as much as Shelley's Mont Blanc had. Bennett's is an excellent study.

William H. Race's discussion of the characteristic features of this form of writing is also instructive to a reading of Keats's ode, though it takes another tack. He expands the discussion of *ekphrasis* to include its use *prior to* Keats, rather than simply assuming, as most critics have, that Krieger was correct in seeing Keats's ode as archetypal.<sup>268</sup> His broader scope pays dividends by bringing to our attention an aspect of *ekphrasistic* poetry that tends to go unnoticed, but which is an important aspect of Keats's ode. *Ekphrasis*, 'an expository speech which clearly brings the subject before our eyes,' is often typified by another important feature which Aphthonius, a poet and school teacher of late antiquity, mentions concluding one of his descriptions of the acropolis at Alexandria:

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words, thus 'actualizes the potential that ekphrasis has always possessed – the capacity to question and challenge the art it ostensibly salutes.' (115)

<sup>266</sup> Andrew J. Bennett. 'Enticing conclusion: John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' Word & Image. Vol.5 (No.4), Oct.-Dec. 1989. 302-14. For a comparable discussion of syntax see Theodor Adorno's 'Parataxis: Zum Späten Lyrik Hölderlins.'

<sup>267</sup> ibid. 307.

<sup>268</sup> William H. Race. Classical Genres and English Poetry. (1988). He discusses Keats's ode himself on pp. 72-75.

Indeed, its beauty is greater than words can tell, and if anything has been omitted, it happened because of wonder.<sup>269</sup>

Race's study shows that the *concluding* expression of *wonder* at a beauty beyond words, in which the poet eventually confesses himself incapable of capturing the feeling evoked by the object he describes is one of the prime features of ekphrastic writing. The convention in the genre is for the descriptive passage to be followed by a movement from the object described to the perceiver's response of wonder at it. The convention of subordinating a response to the object at hand, Race notes, has not been adhered to by Keats in his ode. Rather, the observer's response of wonder is a primary feature of the description. Compared to the *locus classicus*, in <sup>which</sup> wonder at the artistry of a demiurge is a response to the effect of the *work of art*, in Keats's poem the wonder rather significantly accompanies the whole *process*. Race's account has the merit of making particularly clear how the paratactical tendencies of Keats's writing that his fellow critics have observed not only has the *temporal effect* akin to the effect of statuary, it also inverts his *spiritual* response to the object. This tends to have been obscured by current accounts of ekphrasis that do not locate the *locus classicus* in Classical literature and in its paradigm of the artist as a maker.

The sense of 'wonder' is not just a convention of *ekphrastic* writing however. It has implications that are most obviously associated with a response to the marvel of creation. Perhaps the association of this response to the lifeless depictions on the urn offer us an escape from the critical conundrum that has resulted from associating the 'statuary affectation' of this ode to strictly philosophical or linguistic criteria (as has been the wont of the formalist critics): for it expresses the *pathological effect* of the icon on the psyche of the perceiver. It is no doubt for this reason that graven images are forbidden by some religions. This is at the heart of the matter of Keats's ode. It is the danger in descriptive poetry that where the writing too closely approximates the image, it is a short leap to the situation in which the image itself narrates and where the material becomes 'reified' as an idol. Such a process, in which notions of causality are more or less explicit, draws the mind away from the processes of life.

This aspect of the ode becomes clearest when the focus of description, decisively for the 'action' of the ode, leads the urn's admirer to wonder about things not depicted on the urn at all, the 'green altar' and 'little town.' Bennett claims that this gives the effect of 'looking at the other side of the vase.' The poet's dissatisfaction with this eternal, yet un-lived, union acts, just as the word 'forlorn' does in breaking him from the enchantment of his situation in Keats's parallel poem, 'Ode to a Nightingale':

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<sup>269</sup> Cited in Race. *ibid.* 56.

like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Here however the self that Keats returns to is a different one from the one that had originally greeted the urn in the first stanza, largely because of the nature of the object itself. Its eternal life lured him into a false paradise, the dissatisfaction of which he has learned by the end of the poem.

### *My Interpretation*

To present an acceptable discussion of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' it is plain that one must be prepared to discuss its ending. Given the paradox and reversal of the poem, it is not inappropriate to begin there. David Simpson focuses on this key issue when he cites Barbara Herrnstein Smith's study for its particular emphasis on the problematic strength of the closure of the poem:

if Keats had deliberately set himself to construct the most securely closed poem ever written, he could hardly have bettered them. They are all there: verbal repetitions, monosyllabic diction, metrical regularity, formal parallelism, unqualified absolutes, closural allusions, and the oracular assertion of an utter and ultimate verity. And yet it is an open question whether or not these lines offer a poetically legitimate or effective resolution to the thematic structure of the entire ode.<sup>270</sup>

I think we can agree that the strong closure upsets the paradoxical thematic structure of the ode as a whole and hence questions the legitimacy of the resolution. However, I think we must also see this 'overdetermined closure' as part of Keats's intent, though not necessarily for the *reason* that Simpson will state, i.e. as 'a suppressed cyclic imperative, demanding re-reading and reconstruction in the attempt to justify the pseudo-finality of those lines.'<sup>271</sup> Although one certainly wants to re-read the ode to clarify for oneself the puzzling conclusion, this reading suggests that Keats intended that the reader read his poem to demonstrate the hermeneutic issues involved with Romantic aesthetics – which the evidence of his letters etc. cannot support.

It seems incumbent upon the critic not only to account for the ending though, but indeed the unusually pronounced binary opposition throughout the ode of which the ending is only the final and most dramatic expression. This demands the sort of holistic or organic approach to the poem such as a 'formalist' reading would supply. As Helen Vendler, one of the best critics of Keats's poetry, remarks:

This binary pattern, so strictly maintained, is not natural to Keats in so compulsive a form. The odes are all stately, and show many parallelisms of diction and syntax; but the norm is exceeded by far in the *Urn*, and suggests a deliberate constraint on reverie.<sup>272</sup>

Such a deliberate constraint must be accounted for in a manner which would be able to explain both it and the ending. In this respect, the 'formalist' philosophical or linguistic readings do seem warranted and indeed necessary. My contention however is that while they are warranted insofar as Keats's ode is written in terms which are amenable to such a reading,

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<sup>270</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith. *The Poetics of Closure: a Study of How Poems End*. (1970). 195.

<sup>271</sup> Simpson. *op. cit.* 12.

the absolute and abstract terms in the ode and the 'argument' appended to it were being *parodied* by Keats. If this is in fact the case, these critical readings fail to meet Keats's intent in writing this ode and arguably the aspect of his thought that demonstrated the desire for a highly *sensual* and emotive form of poetry, a poetry that conveyed 'life' as he conceived it in terms of organic, cyclical processes.

It seems to me that the poem's 'overdetermined closure,' i.e. the fact that it breaks the aesthetic contract previously established with the reader, can only be understood if we dissociate Keats from what the urn says at the conclusion. This does indeed disrupt the impression of the poem as an 'organic whole.' It does not however exclude the idea that Keats confronts in the urn the product of a form of art, that of the *homo faber*, which he wishes to oppose with his more organic ideas of creativity. For the emphasis of the formalist critics on the philosophical and linguistic paradoxes presented in the ode can be merged with a broader *formal* consideration of its genre and topos, which these critics have rather ironically tended to ignore. This is because formalist readings are only formalist in the very restricted sense of being self-referential, i.e. restricted in their understanding of the emphasis of organicist thinking to the form of the poem. There is a reason why critics have ignored the obvious formal *extrinsic* considerations such as genre and topos, however. Keats's radical change of the *ekphrastic* convention in the poem, noted earlier in the chapter, makes it difficult to place it in its formal tradition. Nonetheless, I believe that he still wished to allude to the genre while providing a different emphasis than an adherence to its conventions would have allowed. The changes the main 'protagonist' in the poem undergoes in response to the urn suggests such a self-conscious process.

The formalist critics therefore understandably associate that speaker and his practice in the poem with Keats himself and his treatment of the conventions of the *ekphrastic* genre. The association has the additional benefit for such critics of making it more amenable to their interpretative practice, which pays 'attention to the role of the interpreter in the constitution of textual meaning'<sup>273</sup> rather than to authorial intent or to traditional generic limitation on the possibilities of interpretation. His 'subjective turn' on the genre allows them to frame the human dilemma he presents in terms that call for creative discourse that remakes the world. Such a practice of interpretation is *consistent* of course with typical Romantic poetic practice. However, there is no reason to assume that Keats agrees with the conclusion of the ode or presents such a break in form for the sake of creating an 'imperative of the continual *process*

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<sup>273</sup> As Andrew Bowie explains the predilection of many modern critical studies. From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory. (1997). 4.

of reading.’ Certainly the inversions are characteristic. Certainly the practice of the speaker of the poem is hardly distinguishable from Keats’s own. Certainly the characteristic formal practice of Romantic hermeneutics argues that Keats’s protagonist could be a ‘Romantic poet.’ How then can we know if it is not Keats’s voice that the urn represents at the conclusion of the ode? The answer of course is that we cannot.

However, if we look beyond the poem’s intrinsic relations, not so as to ignore them or deny that they are typically Romantic in their construction, but rather to argue that they do not in and of themselves necessitate that they represent Keats’s own perspective as such, we are more likely to admit the evidence that Keats may well have intended otherwise than to represent a view which he would have happily adhered to in the conclusion. As was suggested earlier, the *ekphrastic* form and Greek statuary topos of the poem themselves indicate the fact that Keats was engaging with a wide variety of contemporary artistic and intellectual issues. We need not overstate his allegiance to the associations he makes. It is reasonably safe to assume that Keats shared the view of most of his avant-garde poetic and intellectual contemporaries on ‘Classical values,’ particularly that of his intellectual mentor William Hazlitt, that ‘*ut pictura poesis* was no longer a living issue.’<sup>274</sup>

This is precisely the point. Hazlitt was in fact a formative intellectual influence in this period in Keats’s life. As Robert Gittings notes, he was the ‘only modern writer that Keats quoted at length in his letters, and it is sometimes difficult to disentangle Keats’s prose from Hazlitt’s so alike is the style and thought.’<sup>275</sup> This is precisely what makes it so surprising that Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ should lean so heavily ‘for its ideas and their expression on two articles written by the high-priest of eternal art, Haydon, in *The Examiner* of 2 and 9 May.’<sup>276</sup> Haydon’s views on the subject militated strongly against Hazlitt’s. In fact, these two claims are irreconcilable: either Keats is attacking Hazlitt’s perspective or Haydon’s in his ode. There is, I think, ample evidence that the latter is the case. And his means of doing so is parody – the sort of parody that demonstrates the ill-effects of this form of art on the beholder, which is finally broken by what the speaker of the ode acknowledges as the urn’s voice, not his own.

The contrast in tone between the ecstatic assertion of certainty in the final lines of the Ode and the earlier puzzled, excited, querulous, unfulfilled and occasionally indignant tone

<sup>274</sup> Roy Park. *op. cit.* (1971). 117.

<sup>275</sup> John Keats. 147.

has led critics writing from formalist perspectives to various conclusions. It has led them: i) to affirm enthusiastically the power of art in effecting such a change – this has been designated the ‘idealistic’ reading of the text (Brooks). ii) to postulate the play of different qualifying ‘voices’ in the Ode in an endless cycle of ‘Romantic irony.’ (Simpson). iii) to claim that Keats distances himself from the statement of the urn and thus asserts a ‘robust realism.’ (Walter Jackson Bate). iv) to claim an illustration of a bad reader in the response – one not possessing the capacity of negative capability. These possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be found together, though the first two are rather uneasy bedfellows with the latter two. I am more inclined to support the tenor of the latter two readings, though none of the readings suggest a plausible intention for Keats to write this ode as it is that take into account its form and content. Most recent critics have espoused a combination of the first two readings and have taken the final line to be the voice of the poet, the ‘meta-commentator,’ to which the voice of the ‘speaker,’ the urn’s amazed and bewildered interrogator throughout much of the ode, acts as a foil. Such a reading ultimately leaves us with the frustration of the desires of both voices, such that:

The speaker learns by the poet’s rebuke, and the poet learns through the intransigent mystery of his ‘own’ creation, and its refusal to allow him to escape with the illusion of an achieved metacommentary.<sup>277</sup>

In other words the supposed ‘metacommentary’ at the Ode’s conclusion (the objective view) is nothing of the sort. ‘The drama seems to have taken us on a perilous journey only to return us to the point from which we started.’<sup>278</sup> According to such a view, Keats presents us with an alluring example of the mystery of art – the *aporia* of undecidability.

This conclusion has proved attractive to the New Critics and deconstructionists as well as those who attempt to read the Ode ironically as David Simpson does. The supposition of multiple personae in the Ode, made in order to explain the contradiction as a function of something like a drama, is indeed tempting because it furnishes us with a didactic intent in the author which accounts for the confusion the reader has upon reading and even re-reading the Ode, an intention which never quite seems to work upon the reader in the same way it does the speaker, who seems so certain of what the urn ‘says’ to him despite not knowing what its author meant it to say. Simpson’s reading, although I think it ultimately gets the ‘message’ of

<sup>276</sup> *ibid.* 465.

<sup>277</sup> David Simpson. *op. cit.* 14. Simpson’s reading, following Brooks and Wasserman’s, of course strongly depends on the later version of the poem, presented at the outset of this chapter, being adopted. He notes apologetically that this reading (and therefore this version of the ode) has become more acceptable to criticism ‘perhaps as a consequence of its own historical needs as much as of any imperative towards ultimate truths.’ (8) The inverted commas surrounding ‘Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty’ in the 1820 version of the poem are, significantly, missing in the Annals, where they were first published, and the four transcripts.

the ode approximately right, i.e. the inducement of the speaker into a state of *aporia*,<sup>279</sup> does not seem to provide any sort of plausible explanation for the rest of the structure of the poem as it is presented to us. Indeed, as it is, Simpson's suggestion merely presents us with 'a spate of uninterpretable ironies has the same effect as providing no experience in irony at all.'<sup>280</sup> His unstable notion of irony has what Booth calls a 'dulling effect.'

Moreover, such a metanarrative reading which posits *different* voices must also ignore the original published version of the ode in The Annals of the Fine Arts, which includes the posited 'poet's metacomment' within the saying of the urn. The justification for preferring the later version appears dubious aside from the harmony with which such a reading both adheres to a common vision detected in the corpus of Keats's poetry and letters and fuels an endless supply of new criticism. In a certain respect these two aspects have perpetuated one another: Keats has been deemed particularly interesting because his poetry is said by critics to express certain 'timeless' problems, which are however only problems endemic in Romantic hermeneutics and the practice of representing art as a process of life. This timelessness has translated itself so that his excellence seems to consist in the fact that one can write endless sheaves of criticism about him, a fact equated with profundity. In fact, the perpetual appeal to a relevance that critics never even attempt to define ensures that Keats will always be relevant in this way.

The irony of these formalist critical readings though is that they are very evidently products of a *more radical version of Lebensphilosophie* that wishes to understand art not only from the *perspective* of the processes of life, but its end product as a living organism as it were. The 'life' that the Romantic poets sought to *mediate* is thought to reside in the living words on the page. This seems to me altogether too narrow an emphasis. The intent to deal with *epistemological problems* emphasised by the critical schools I shall discuss, problems which follow on naturally from this belief in the 'life' of the organic work, was only rarely expressed by Keats in his copious correspondence. It must be seen to be grossly exaggerated as a poetic influence. Keats was preoccupied by thoughts of love, death, suffering and poetic fame, not abstracted epistemological argument. Even more far-fetched is the recent propensity that critics such as Jerome McGann present of reading everything written by Keats as a reflection of social radicalism, as if his combination of acquaintance with radicals and a

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<sup>279</sup> *Aporia*, an impasse, is the term Plato uses to describe the state in which Socrates left his interlocutors following his destruction of their claims to know something. Keats manages quite the opposite – he illustrates the power of the image to induce an observer into believing himself to know something which we, the reader, know he does not. Interestingly, this delusive effect upon the listener is Plato's main objection to both the Sophists and the poet/teacher in his dialogues.

<sup>280</sup> Wayne Booth. A Rhetoric of Irony. (1974). 227.



sympathetic nature made him a *de facto* pre-Marxist in his poetics. We must be careful to keep the issues he concentrates on in his poetry and letters at the forefront of our reading.

One plausible alternative to a reading that would contest a reading of the Keatsian 'philosophy of life' and its processes in confrontation with the eternal values of the work of art, with its fixed aims and intentions, is indeed presented by McGann. This must be addressed before continuing. If we direct ourselves back to the much-debated issue of which ending to the ode should be regarded as definitive, McGann resists the supposition of most other critics that it is a later version of the *Ode*. Indeed he provides a very plausible proposal that suggests a different way of 'reading' the urn: that the illegible, unintelligible 'leaf-fring'd legend' of the ode's beginning is in fact the same that is so clear and absolute at the end of the ode in the apophthegm, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' That is to say, in a manner following his 'progression' in the poem to imagining scenes not on the urn in stanza four, the speaker himself can now 'read' what he earlier could not.<sup>281</sup> This has the additional beauty for the critic of obviating the problematic issue of the ending in the two versions of the ode, as it is what the *speaker imagines* that is now asserted to be depicted on the urn (so vividly in fact that it speaks!) even though it was initially illegible. It seems only that much more obvious when we consider that the metacommentary voice is in utter agreement with what the urn says in the later version (which most critical editions use). What the urn 'says' must then quite literally be understood as a figment of the 'speaker's/ poet's' imagination in all versions of the ode. The concern as to which quoted passage expresses the author's true intentions for the ode thus becomes irrelevant as there is only one 'voice' in fact in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' And it has been 'dulled' and transformed throughout the ode almost into the very image of the urn.

But McGann's suggested reading must ignore the obvious distance the speaker takes from the urn's pronouncement in the conclusion – it is clearly the *urn* that utters its eternal verity, not the speaker, and the speaker distances himself from it by making it clear that it is what 'thou,' that is the urn, 'sayst.' The impression that Keats, on the contrary, wished to parody this eternal transcendence is strengthened by the anecdotal evidence that he had been exchanging cool letters with Haydon, 'the high-priest of eternal art,' throughout the month of April immediately prior to penning the ode.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> This would of course fit Keats's usual sentiments on silent or unfinished works. For example, Keats comments in a December 1818 journal-letter about engravings from the frescoes in the Campo Santo at Pisa that they are 'even finer to me than more accomplish'd works – as there was left so much room for Imagination.'

<sup>282</sup> Robert Gittings. *John Keats*. (1979). 465.

### *Silence*

The key to a reading that would emphasise the philosophy of life confronting the 'eternal perspective' of art without reading the poem as an 'organic whole' is Keats's speaker's reference to silence in it. If we take the speaker to be addressing the urn from the perspective of a 'philosopher of life' (and as a would-be worshipper) the silence of the urn and its lack of response to his persistent attempts to engage with it in dialogue can be interpreted as a symbol of the meaninglessness of the aesthetic experience of the urn as a *work* of art for him. The urn's depicted allusions, predetermined by its maker and indeterminable by him, and its relative transcendence of the ravages of time, attract but also frustrate him. They give him no common ground of life on which to relate to the urn. His description of the urn as a 'friend to man,' despite its allusions to the *absolutes* of Beauty and Truth its silence bespeaks, can thus be understood as a projection of his own desires (in evidence throughout the ode in the oxymoronic reflexive nature of the description) to fill the longing in his heart for *eternal life*, a longing he knows however to be impossible to fulfil for the silent urn: 'Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/ As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!'

Unfortunately, the matter is complicated for us because the speaker in the ode is a somewhat biased spectator – far from providing us with a metacommentary voice that would guide us away from this error, he in fact seems very much to desire self-oblivion and self-deception; he repeatedly applies his 'negative capability' to the urn as if it were a living being. Consequently he provides us with little criticism of the urn's artistry until the late note of rue that the urn will not provide him with what he desires and he claims it possesses 'more sweetly' in its silence than he does in his words. He receives what he desires from the urn through his living imagination, which speaks for the urn, but as such it only gives him what he gives it – life. There is no true reciprocity because he desires a marriage of equals, something befitting him, and that the urn cannot afford him, nor he it.

Another aspect of the encounter is worth remarking on though. In spite of the latent, if obvious conflict between the speaker, who approaches the objet d'art from the perspective of the philosophy of life, and its status (that resists it), it is noteworthy that the urn's artistry is initially considered superior to his own. This appears to be because it does not appeal to him as a mortal man, but as a 'spirit,' perhaps the sort of intelligence, the 'spark of the divine' he referred to in his letter to J H Reynolds of 3 May, 1818. The urn's silent artistry is 'sweeter' and 'more endeared' because it pipes its ditties exclusively to the spirit, *not* to the sensual ear which shall, like 'this generation,' 'waste'. Moreover, it allows us a temporary diversion from our thoughts of mortality, it 'tease(s) us out of thought/ As doth eternity.' Here the

factor of 'slow time' enters the frame as it did with its spouse, silence, the foster-parents of the urn in the first stanza.<sup>283</sup> This understanding of man as a spirit may very well be a demonstration of the fact that the Enlightenment's universal perspective, inherent in the terms of the Cartesian subject, has been perpetuated and exacerbated by the shift to organicism in the Romantic period rather than truly resolved by it. Its crisis of self-legitimation continues, not because it is referred to verification in a transcendent source as before, but because it is now referred back to life itself, life as an answer to the question of life.

In the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' Keats depicts a process whereby the urn is approached as a silent and eternal aesthetic object but is, as a human being, affected by it in ways incompatible with such qualities. The images presented to him on the urn's surface do appeal particularly to his imagination, but because he only asks questions in the first stanza that will inform his factual knowledge of the figures on the urn,<sup>284</sup> the pageantry of life, he receives or imagines responses in kind in the final. He does not receive answers to the sort of questions which beset him and leave him with a 'burning forehead and a parching tongue.' The certain claims it offers from its eternal perspective marginalise the human perceiver (and by extension the humanities) which always require an *ex tempore* human treatment and not an unassailable 'eternal' perspective.

The queries, then, bypass matters which are of obvious concern to Keats in the ode. But Keats is concerned in this ode to trace the effect of a certain approach to art to its conclusion and thus to teach by bad example. As stated earlier, the diction of the speaker in the ode actually suggests that he is affected by the urn, almost to the point of being transformed in its image. It becomes unclear whether he speaks for the urn or it speaks for him. As Paul Fussell notes in his Poetic Metre & Poetic Form:

While most poets like to introduce spondaic substitutions initially or medially, Keats seems fond of introducing them at the ends of lines; indeed terminal substitution is a hallmark of the Keatsian style.(41)

Indeed we note this substitution of a spondee at numerous points in the first two stanzas: in the words 'slow time' in the first, and in most of the endings of the second. The effect of the

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<sup>283</sup> This is the point wherein the issues dealt with in the ode can be expanded to encompass a much broader reading. The parent of the urn, its creator, the artist, is not Keats's interest, nor is there any hint of rivalry or comparison with the artist of the urn, but rather with the urn itself. The statuary-poetry debate of Winckelmann and Lessing thus takes a new twist as the art-object is torn from its relation to its creator and is seen by the perceiver as a self, like himself, out of touch with his Creator and 'existing' as it were without any notion of having been created. What would seem to be an artistic issue thus expands to become an issue concerning the human condition itself.

<sup>284</sup> As he does similarly in the fourth. These latter questions however distinguish themselves from those previous by implicitly recognising the need to look beyond the particular figures on the urn, like in life, to where they have come from and where they are going, to which the urn provides no answer.

spondees, to slow the lines to almost a total stop, of course gives the ode a solid structure like the urn itself. It adds a more marked polarity to the encounter between urn and ‘man,’ of object encountered by a spirit requesting ‘ditties of no tone’ and indulging in the bittersweetness of momentary oblivion to his fears of death and his sense of meaningless existence. The two types of media, the verbal one that Keats uses and the one he is describing, achieve a sort of fusion. Though the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ does not occur in strictly descriptive language, the syntax mimics the urn’s corporeality and the manner of thinking reflects this – the being of the urn is thought to reside in the object rather than in relation to its creator’s (author’s) intention.<sup>285</sup>

The final stanza reveals the underlying reproach of the author for this perspective of eternal art. Keats personally is of course not entirely opposed to this perspective either. As Gittings notes: ‘Beauty in art and the truth of life are seen as complementary to each other in Keats’s ‘World of Pains and troubles.’<sup>286</sup> Keats’s perspective on life and art was no longer, like Haydon, that in which Beauty and Truth make ‘all disagreeables evaporate’, but that in which the ‘Chamber of Maiden Thought,’ where we see nothing but ‘pleasant wonders’, ‘becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open’<sup>287</sup> and the world becomes a ‘vale of Soul-making.’<sup>288</sup> However, as I have argued, Keats’s own perspective is not being presented in the ode (despite similarities the conclusion bears with statements in earlier letters), but rather that of a typical reader of the *Annals* who is being parodied. One must dismiss the suggestion that the speaker of the ode is reflective of Keats himself, who, though his letters, poetry and biography seem to reflect these concerns constantly, rarely seems any more content with the solution than my reading would suggest. One thing is clear, and that is that the urn’s message is not such that will provide any consolation to a mortal or an understanding of his mortality. It asserts a timeless truth which is true only insofar as it is timeless but of little use to a human being wanting meaning in a mortal existence:

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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<sup>285</sup> Augustine, in his treatise entitled ‘On Original Sin’ explains sin as the act of regarding created things’ essences (and therefore their good) as residing in themselves rather than in relation to their Creator. Keats’s ode would seem to suggest that unless a reading of a text takes into account the author and his intention in creating it, a similar ‘sin’ occurs – that is that we thus create a solipsistic text which only reflects ourselves. The effect is ironically that we can never recognise ourselves.

<sup>286</sup> Robert Gittings. *John Keats*. 469.

<sup>287</sup> To J.H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818.

<sup>288</sup> To the George Keatses, 14 February – 3 May 1819.

For we know this is neither *what* we know (let alone all *we* know) – because the urn’s ‘silent eternity’ says it – nor all we *need* to know, because we, like Keats and the readers of the Annals, are this wasting generation.

### *Suggested Interpretations: Four Representative Critics*

In this final section I have taken four critical approaches to Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as representative of the attempts to engage with the hermeneutic difficulties created by Romantic poetics and its practice of writing that eschews explicit notions of causality, in particular the model of the poet as a maker. I have presented these approaches in a loosely chronological fashion because many of them can be more clearly understood as a partial reaction to their predecessors. The four approaches are as following: (i) The New Critical; (ii) The Deconstructionist; (iii) The New Historicist; (iv) The Romantic Ironist. Most of these categories have rather blurred boundaries and traits of one can often be found coalescing with traits of another, particularly in more recent approaches, but the purpose of this exposition is to identify the critical tendencies and relate them to the Romantic ideal of the artistry of life that Arendt described at the end of the second chapter of this thesis.

#### *A New Critic*

The New Critics, under the influence of T.S. Eliot, claim that poetry is essentially a quickening of the diverse and complex totality of human experience. The meaning in a text is inherent not just in the individual words on the page, as has been occasionally charged, but in the text as a self-contained unit. By the New Critics' account, 'a reading which selects such statements out of context for either praise or blame springs from the 'message-hunting' impulse' that attributes meaning to the poem that is not warranted by its formal integrity.<sup>289</sup> Syntax, taken in its broadest sense as an 'ordering together' (and here not just words but connotations, associations, ideas etc. is meant) is obviously a primary consideration of such an approach. The critical habit of paraphrase, by contrast, is an anathema to such an approach as it perceives a certain reduction to lie in the 'translation.' At the heart of this understanding then is the perception that poetry depicts an understanding of life that is far more subtle and complex than can be understood in ordinary language and in the latent sense of causality that is presented in it.

The pedigree of the New Critical view can probably be traced to Coleridge's suggestion in the *Biographia Literaria* that the language of poetry and the language of science are far more appropriate antitheses than that of poetry to prose, though it is primarily a reaction to the naïve historicising criticism of the nineteenth century, the sort that Browning mocked for its desire to note the express importance of 'what Mr. Keats had had for breakfast' when he wrote xxxxx, i.e. the critical equivalent of logical positivism. To be fair to the New Critics, I think we must understand that it is more a certain mindset that their

criticism opposes rather than an actual poetry/ prose distinction. Nonetheless, the myth of poetry's sacred transcendent language has been firmly entrenched by these critics, an issue on which they have rightly been attacked subsequently.

The special truth-claim of poetry is the guiding light to this school of criticism. The following excerpt illustrates this school's motivation against the Enlightenment view that poetry makes no truth-claims because it bases itself on the inconstant ground of human feelings:

This general question of the "truth" of poetry is answered if we reflect for a moment on the impulses which take us to poetry. We do not read poetry for the scientific truth of particular statements. We do not read poetry for specific moral instructions. Statements that taken in isolation would seem to raise issues of scientific truth or falsity, and statements that would seem to embody specific moral judgments are not, as we have seen, to be taken by themselves, but as factors contributing to the development of the total experience and the total meaning which the poet is trying to develop for us. A reading which selects such statements out of context for either praise or blame springs from the "message-hunting" impulse... A reader should constantly remember that such detailed statements should be interpreted in the light of the total effect. (491)

What 'the total effect' actually entails is the key point of difference between this school and its would-be successors: for, with the exception of the deconstructionists (who question, in a totalising way, whether the 'total effect' is an applicable notion given the problems of Romantic poetics), all of the schools of criticism that are dealt with in the following make a claim to base their critique on an appeal to a 'totality' or larger schema. But this is the only one of the schools which does not appeal, despite its detractors' claims, to a transcendent or universal schema based on reason. The totality for this school is contained in the idea that the author's intent in composing the poem as it is is still 'alive' in the text; and it assumes that it may still be accessed by the reader if he accords due respect for the integrity of the text as a form of life, i.e. he does not dissect it or inject it with foreign ideas, as it were.

The assumption of the New Critics that particularly raises the ire of other schools of criticism is that they employ no prejudices in their notion of art. This is maintained in spite of the fact that they employ a more or less traditional sense of the literary canon while excluding the issues of historical or biographical intentions from their consideration. The fact that prejudices are not even considered to be an issue in most of these accounts, in particular the prejudice their living notion of art has to a religious sense of transcendence (despite its obvious correspondences) makes it all the more obvious that it does have them. Nevertheless, they make no reference to prejudices. This is because they associate their claims to the universal criterion of transcendence and 'organic' representations of it. Their notion of

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<sup>289</sup> Brooks and Warren. Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students. (1938). 491.

universality is flavoured with the sense of a two-world view, while espousing the one-world view of the 'organic work,' a fact that makes them dissatisfactory to universalists and Christians alike.

With this background in mind, if we move on to Cleanth Brooks's reading of the ode in The Well-Wrought Urn, we find that he contends that the poem was 'intended to be a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general.' He suggests that we should read the ode as a formal unity, but realises that this necessitates that he explain the apparent injury to the integrity of the poem made in its final lines. We must read it carefully. Brooks insists that to perceive this unity, we need to ask the right questions of the poem. We should avoid posing the sort of question that would force us to refer *outside* the poem for an answer, like 'what did Keats the man perhaps want to assert here about the relation of beauty and truth' and instead ask a question that could be answered by sole reference to the structures of the poem, such as 'was Keats the poet able to exemplify that relation in this particular poem?'<sup>290</sup> In other words, he proposes that we should consider how the relations of the poem are constructed to make it a microcosm of the macrocosmic themes it contains. To maintain the coherence of the poem, Brooks' reading proposes that the final lines are spoken in a *different voice*, as in a drama.<sup>291</sup> This allows us to waive 'the question of the scientific or philosophic truth of the lines' 'in favor of the application of a principle curiously like that of dramatic propriety.' It is clear to him that 'some such principle is the only one legitimately to be invoked in any case' because the ode would otherwise display a sort of incoherence that argues it to be a failure.<sup>292</sup>

The structure of the ode is based on paradox. It is the formal unity of such apparent contradictions that Brooks, following Eliot, asserts to constitute the essence of all great art. Precisely because it can unify the disparate and complex, Brooks contends that a poem can express what is otherwise inexpressible. The 'ironic undercurrent' that asserts itself in the third stanza of the ode can thus be understood in terms of the broader definition of paradox (in which sense is controverted) so that 'warm and still to be enjoy'd' may have the additional layer of meaning 'warm *because* still to be enjoy'd'.<sup>293</sup> Brooks rebuffs Garrod's suggestion

<sup>290</sup> Cleanth Brooks. The Well-Wrought Urn. (1947). 153

<sup>291</sup> Behind his suggestion of dramatic propriety, we must understand a reference to T.S. Eliot's criticism of the ode. Eliot had asserted that Shakespeare's 'Ripeness is all' had a truth that Keats's urn did not precisely because it did not explicitly purport to assert the truth. It had been uttered by a character in a play as a subjective opinion. Brooks turns Eliot's statement back upon him by locating the urn's utterance similarly 'in the mouth of a dramatic character,' 'governed and qualified by the whole context of the play.' (154)

<sup>292</sup> ibid. 154.

<sup>293</sup> ibid. 159.



that Keats loses control of the ode at the end of the third stanza and takes it 'farther than he meant to go' by again emphasising the underlying unity of theme in the ode that the urn's task as a 'sylvan historian' is such that the 'town implied by the urn' in the fourth stanza 'has a richer and more important history than that of actual histories.'<sup>294</sup> It is worth noting that both Brooks and Garrod make the assumption that it is Keats himself who addresses the urn in the ode – this seems integral to the view of the organic work being a representation of the spirit of the poet. Brooks, like Wasserman, suggests that the concluding lines valorise an 'insight into essential truth' that is to be distinguished from the 'data' and 'facts' of the material world.<sup>295</sup> It is precisely this reference to an essential truth that is inherent in, yet not reducible to, the life of the organic work that has prompted the reactions against it as propagating a new form of metaphysics. It is neither the life nor the transcendence that is objectionable to its successors per se, it is the connection of the two.

### *A Deconstructionist*

In an essay dedicated to the memory of Paul de Man, Barbara Jones Guetti looks at the apparently incongruous combination of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Marx's Communist Manifesto together in order to demonstrate something that de Man himself had repeatedly tried to establish.<sup>296</sup> Contrasting him to Stanley Fish, whose 'reader response' perspective contends that texts are written and achieve their meaning in the context of their 'interpretative communities,' Guetti says that de Man tried to establish that no such 'interpretative community' existed because of the inherent 'problem of reading' 'literature.' Both Keats's and Marx's works, she claims, set to reprimand 'literature' in their own ways: the former by appearing 'to valorize the urn as an aesthetic, ahistorical, and virtually wordless or 'silent' object,' the latter by asserting a rival claim to 'show' something that literature tends to distort more openly. She attempts to obliterate the distinction between canonical and non-canonical literature and 'between 'poetic' and 'referential' discourse'<sup>297</sup> by asserting that the incomprehensible, 'magical' character of what is normally called 'literature' also typifies more prosaic writing such as Marx's. She adopts de Man's understanding of literature as a *place* where differences between the dualistic forces of *grammar* and *rhetoric* are indistinguishable, which makes reading it 'an unreliable process of knowledge production' not 'leading to the knowledge of an entity (such as language)' but only providing 'consistently defective models of language's impossibility to be a model language.'<sup>298</sup>

<sup>294</sup> *ibid.* 162.

<sup>295</sup> *ibid.* 164. Earl Wasserman's The Finer Tone (1953) makes a slightly different interpretation that observes the same basic critical presuppositions.

<sup>296</sup> Barbara Jones Guetti. 'Resisting the Aesthetic.' (Spring 1987). 33-45.

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.* 33.

<sup>298</sup> *ibid.* 33.

Guetti's proposal for understanding the ode is not entirely dissimilar to Brooks's reading in so far as both see the dominant figure of the ode as that of 'address' as opposed to the 'description' that critics who have attempted to read the ode *ekphrastically* have suggested. They take the questions 'literally' in the sense that they posit an 'enquirer' in the poem. But whereas Brooks had proposed to solve the potential disunity of the poem by taking it 'literally' as a dramatic piece of *dialogue* between a mortal voice and an eternal (universal) voice, Guetti proposes to take the Ode as a frustrated attempt to 'read the urn', i.e. as a *monologue* in which the voices of grammar and rhetoric are indistinguishable. For Guetti, the language itself does speak, but it still cannot be attributed to the 'exclusive senses' of personhood that a dialogue would suggest. Exclusive senses of agency would open the possibility of a *determination* of the words' meaning, either in reference to the author's or the reader's or the community's intention, which would re-introduce by the back door the model of the artist as a *maker* rather than as a *mediator* of life. Deconstruction is of all the critical schools the most scrupulous in avoiding that connotation, just as it is Shelley, the hero of deconstruction, who is the most scrupulous in avoiding it in his poetry.

In Guetti's hands the ode becomes an exercise of epistemological exploration by the individual, whose inevitable end in failure 'demonstrates' the impossibility of communication or achieving a common sense of unity. In other words, she takes it as a demonstration of the unavailability of the hermeneutic *aporia*. This follows on from her reading of de Man and his discussion of the problem posed by recent applications of the concept of universality in literary theory.

As suggested at various points throughout the thesis, one of the primary issues at stake in literary theory is whether it is possible to access truth through language, an issue problematised by radical notions of subjectivity and their effective creation of more than one unified objective world – the problem of hermeneutics for subjects conceived as living atoms in an organic universe, which nonetheless depends on notions of causality in order to become comprehensible. <sup>In attempting to achieve understanding,</sup> The universality of subjectivity, which <sup>causes what</sup> de Man calls *rhetoric*, wars in a dualistic battle with the particular referents of language, which de Man calls *grammar*. There is another problem however. De Man also made it clear that the lack of a consensus on what constituted literature had created a discrepancy between truth and method, between (and one must see an explicit rejection of Gadamer's *primum opus* here) *Wahrheit* and *Methode*. The immediate consequences of this observation are clear:

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<sup>298</sup> Paul de Man. *Allegories of Reading*. (1979). 19.

If there is indeed something about literature, as such, which allows for a discrepancy between truth and method...then scholarship and theory are no longer necessarily compatible; as a first casualty of this complication, the notion of 'literature as such' as well as the clear distinction between history and interpretation can no longer be taken for granted. For a method that cannot be made to suit the 'truth' of its object can only teach delusion.<sup>299</sup>

De Man seizes upon the problem (which I also addressed in the first chapter) of the wedding Gadamer had tried to arrange between a sense of universality and common sense in 'life' and its prejudices. If the critical method is based on universality, yet the truth is based on a dogmatic notion of tradition as developed by the *sensus communis* of life's prejudices, then truth and method, as they are put into practice in scholarship and theory respectively, are quite possibly incommensurable activities. The 'resistance to theory' that de Man senses is a resistance by scholars to the continued attempt by theoreticians to apply *methodically* the Enlightenment's universal 'prejudice against prejudice.'

De Man is forced into an untenable position however by his 'prejudice against prejudice,' a situation he acknowledges. He admits that although 'a general statement about literary theory should not, in theory, start from 'pragmatic considerations,' progress has occurred along 'theoretical rather than 'pragmatic lines',' only because of the dependence the systematic approach has on axiomatic preconceptions of what was 'literary.' In other words, something 'literary' has been found by theoreticians because they had been prejudiced to understand what was literary in advance. However, he still maintains that because this subject-matter cannot be derived *a priori*, i.e. universally, any perception of 'progress' in the realm of theory is illusory. Gadamer cannot claim to promote the advance of the human spirit or appeal to truth by referring to life's prejudices.

De Man points out a significant problem here, which is revealed on examination of the issue of the literary canon: if what is (or was) conceived as literary is no longer agreed upon, then it cannot be known if it is true according to the criterion of universality (which he rightly detects behind the idea of the 'absolute prejudices of life'). For example, if our understanding of the most noble genre of literature of all, the epic, entails that we have more or less explicit notions of heroism – such as create memorable words and deeds – passed on down to us by the Greeks, and if the *glory* of such deeds is recast by Milton, in his Christian revision of the epic, as *vainglorious* because they are prideful, individualistic and destructive, and if we tend to side with Milton in these affairs, but, in a postmodern world, we more than likely reject his Christian interpretation of the idea of heroism, in what sense can we say that

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<sup>299</sup> Paul de Man. 'The Resistance to Theory.' *The Resistance to Theory*. (1986). 3-20. 4.

we derive our understanding from the perspective of truth, if truth is derived from life? And how do we propose to come to such a perspective on the vainglory of the individual from an appeal to the prejudices of 'life'? The incompatibility that he suggests *might* exist between a universal, critical method and historical truth must, it seems, be right – though one might retort that truth is not dependent upon the assent of a consensus.

But de Man clearly will only accept truth on the grounds of universal assent, and therefore this problem for him contains the implicit assumption that truth requires that it be universally (and repeatedly) verifiable. I think de Man inverts the real problem, both chronologically and logically speaking, when he suggests that the lack of consensus on what literature is has created a discrepancy between truth and method. The contrary is the case: the fact that 'truth' has a different source than does the current universal 'method' has led to a lack of consensus on what constitutes literature. Truth cannot be known methodically. And it cannot be known (or 'read') universally, that is, theoretically, in the manner he suggests. For what he demands of tradition involves an impossible drive for absolutisation – a drive whose initial failure in the Enlightenment had prompted the Romantics to grasp the notion of the organic body as a means of uniting the impossible divide between the Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* confronting a world of *res extensae*. De Man in his attack on the New Critics reverts back to the aims of the Enlightenment.

I think it must be clear following what I have already written that Guetti's attempt to 'read' the Urn first as a subjective epistemological 'address' and then as a failure according to such terms can hardly receive approbation. But the particulars of such a reading should also be addressed – one example should suffice to throw light on at least a couple of the examples Guetti proposes. The example Guetti uses to buttress her own argument in de Man's 'Resistance to Theory' is the 'dilemma' he said was posed for the reader by the title of Keats's The Fall of Hyperion. For de Man the problem with the poem begins before one even begins, with the ambiguity of the genitive in the title. This ambiguity is intensified because of the depersonalised sense in which narrative is presented by the Romantics. If we remove the primary prejudice of personhood and replace it with a more ambiguous sense of 'selfhood' (which, as Shelley suggested, can be eroded further to a lack of true distinction between thoughts and things), it leaves us with a genuine dilemma in interpreting the creative (or possessive) sense associated with the genitive. Do we interpret the genitive in The Fall of Hyperion:

as meaning "Hyperion's fall," the case story of the defeat of an older by a newer power, the very recognizable story from which Keats indeed started out from but from which he increasingly strayed away, or as "Hyperion falling," the much less

specific but more disquieting evocation of an actual process of falling, regardless of its beginning, its end or the identity of the entity to whom it befalls to be falling.<sup>300</sup>

De Man is technically quite right in pointing out the ambiguity of the genitive (though in fact it is transcribed by the English dative 'of'). He is also quite right to point out that 'it matters a great deal how we read the title,' for if Hyperion, to take one half of the genitive construction, is taken to be the *genetivus subjectivus*, then the poem is about Hyperion's particular fall; if Hyperion is taken to be *genetivus objectivus*, then of course it follows that the subject of the poem will be the fall and Hyperion will be a particular case illustrative of a broader possibility. However in practice this usage in English is unambiguous: every native speaker would understand by the title that we were talking specifically about Hyperion's fall and only the context of the poem itself could suggest otherwise i.e. there is not a grammatical or a syntactical ambiguity in employing the dative transliteration of the genitive in English.<sup>301</sup>

On the assumption, however, that an ambiguity was present at the most basic level of language, one could actually extend the compass of the ambiguity beyond this particular poem to all genitive constructions. This will lead us to question, as Guetti intuitively notes de Man does in commenting on Yeats's 'Among School Children,'<sup>302</sup> how we can actually know the 'dancer from the dance' or, more abstractly, how we can know a subject from a predicate, or a being from an action. Now it will not have escaped the reader's notice that the passage in Yeats commented on does not take the form of a genitive, but that hardly matters, for such details, though inaccurate, can be ignored when the author's train of thought is clear – and I think that Guetti quite rightly sees the logical connection of agent and *action belonging to it* between both examples. What is intolerable however is the reference to Yeats's question as a 'rhetorical question' when interpreted as 'asserting the unity of part and whole, form and experience, creator and creation' – which is surely what Yeats intended by the question – but 'literal' only when 'released from such delusive affirmations of unity.'<sup>303</sup> Yeats's question would indeed be rhetorical if he expected no answer because he assumed that his readers, like he, knew the answer. The meaning 'fictive' or 'spurious' attributed to 'rhetorical' is wholly de Man's doing and is entirely dependent upon the reader not taking language 'literally' enough to reject his misinterpretation, which denies fundamental syntactical structures and ready associations, out of hand. Yet again we must note that his observance is foisted, almost hypocritically, on his audience's 'common sense' knowledge of what it means for Yeats to be

<sup>300</sup> *ibid.* 16.

<sup>301</sup> One could only speculate if this is because of the restriction of the definite article in English, unlike in Greek or German, to designations of particular things (except perhaps in 'gnomic' phrases [of universal validity] such as 'the pen is mightier than the sword').

<sup>302</sup> And, as de Man notes, the basis upon which an entire tradition of understanding is built.

<sup>303</sup> Paul de Man. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, (1984). 200-02.

asking a rhetorical question to begin with. There can be only one explanation for this and other such inconsistencies if we do not wish to question de Man's integrity. He is not consistent because he is trying to preserve what his line of argument, if it were valid, would destroy. He also is promoting an artistic model of the processes of life against the causal notions of the artist as maker that he, like Shelley, saw to be inherent in the 'exclusive senses of personhood' contained in grammatical constructions such as personal pronouns.

Guetti provides evidence of similar readings of Keats in connection with Greek culture, such as in his poem addressed 'To Homer' which begins 'Standing aloof in giant ignorance/ Of thee I hear.' She claims that this introduction leaves us 'grammatically' uncertain whether the giant ignorance belongs to Homer or Keats. Even if we are to entertain this suggestion of uncertainty, the fact that the 'of thee' is the object of the main clause 'I hear' and also the genitive attribute of 'ignorance' would rule out attributing it to be the subject of the subordinate clause 'Standing aloof in giant ignorance.' If we try to apply this sort of problem back to a 'reading' of Ode on a Grecian Urn, we are still left with the fact that the questions Keats poses to the urn can hardly be held to be rhetorical. Although the urn does not answer him, can this be seen as a sign that the speaker is assuming an underlying, tacit understanding, or can even be evoking such an understanding? Guetti and de Man misuse their terms here and confuse our understanding in the process. What sort of questions these are is another question, perhaps one of the questions of the ode – are they the questions of an 'enquiring spirit?'

If we then follow de Man's example, as Guetti proposes we must, and 'take the questions addressed to the urn by Keats as real questions' (sic. which display the 'negative reliability of language' unlike conventional rhetorical questions – which assume that it is 'positively reliable') we can conclude that since Keats

doesn't know the very things about the urn that would have been of utmost importance to the people who made it...(etc.) that the urn 'matters to Keats because of his ignorance about it.'<sup>304</sup>

I hope however that I am not following his example and have given sufficient reason why not. Nor do I think the urn to be important to Keats just because of his ignorance of it. Such an interpretation would then have it that this is a 'meditation on how the loss of meaning in the course of history creates aesthetic masterworks,'<sup>305</sup> in other words how grammatical unreliability somehow translates to be an aesthetic value. This seems to me to be a

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<sup>304</sup> Guetti. *op. cit.* 35.

<sup>305</sup> *ibid.* 36.

thoroughly confused and confusing manner of understanding the poem, of aesthetic value and of human nature.

### *A New Historicist*

The contesting and polemical *formal* claims of both 'deconstructive' literary theory and the New Critics, the former relating forever back upon the circularity of the life-processes what the latter had elevated to transcendence, have perhaps brought about the emergence of the 'common sense' school of New Historicism in the 1980s. Jerome McGann is one of the more prominent of the New Historicists. Given the place of Keats in both New Critical and Deconstructionist criticism it is not surprising that he begins his influential book The Beauty of Inflections with a chapter on Keats as well.<sup>306</sup> The New Historicist method, as McGann employs it, is in fact based on the Marxist, so-called Bakhtin school of criticism, which contends that 'the material of poetry is language...as a system of social evaluations, not as the aggregate of linguistic possibilities.'<sup>307</sup> In other words, it attributes life to the processes of labour in society and the interaction therein rather than in the play of forces in the organic text. It is worth mentioning from the outset that many of the observations McGann makes regarding particular poems are in fact good ones and very informative as aids to reflection on them. But at the theoretical level, his approach is badly misconceived. If the general fault of the former two schools of critical thought was to derive meaning *aggregatively* from undifferentiated and depersonalised formal linguistic relations *intrinsic* in a text conceived as a form of life, the general error of the latter is, as McGann is aware of but unable to avoid, to fall 'into a crudely reflective theory of poetry' by reducing texts to an *extrinsic* schema.<sup>308</sup>

McGann's discussion actually begins with his objection to Paul de Man's treatment of Keats in his famous introduction to his poetry.<sup>309</sup> His primary objection is that de Man, while usually ignoring 'extrinsic' considerations, nonetheless allows them to enter into criticism when and where he deems them to be appropriate – without defining at what point that might actually be. This ambiguity allows de Man to avoid what is in fact a problematic issue and pursue a theory which 'alienates' the poem from its social setting. McGann's criticism here seems to be legitimate. He objects to the unambiguous end to which de Man has interpreted what he describes as the *potential* incommensurability between the Enlightenment notion of universality (and its method) and the pre-Enlightenment notions of truth, to entail intellectual paralysis. While noting the legitimacy of the problem as to when,

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<sup>306</sup> Jerome McGann. The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory. (1985).

<sup>307</sup> M.M. Bakhtin. The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. (1978). 133.

<sup>308</sup> McGann. *ibid.* 20.

<sup>309</sup> De Man, Paul, ed.. John Keats: Selected Poetry. (1966).

where and under what conditions extrinsic evidence should be admitted, I think we are forced to admit as well that it is a problem that cannot be satisfactorily solved. That is, other than to state 'where it is appropriate.' For the intellectual and spiritual exercise of criticism would seem to be something unquantifiable, i.e. it is an art with similar questions surrounding it as those of any of the humanities. Questions of what details should or should not be included in a critique are largely left to the critic's discretion, a conclusion that admittedly seems more and more dissatisfactory with the continuing erosion of the Christian *sensus communis* and promotion of radical notions of plurality according to the prejudices of 'life' – for this plurality is based on the idea of the fundamental role played by biological differences, to which all others, e.g. nationality, religion, gender are referred. This appeal to discretion may prove unpalatable to some who would reduce it to a science akin to the natural sciences, but this is a prime aspect of criticism and will always be, as de Man had conceded in referring to its 'necessarily pragmatic element.'

McGann's counterproposal is however, even given this concession, unwarranted, because it hinges its sure foundation on a network of social relations that never allow it to escape 'pragmatism':

A comprehensive theory will show that we need not doubt the relevance of 'extrinsic' methods and materials; rather, what the critic must weigh are the problems of how best and most fully to elucidate the poem's (presumed) networks of social relations.<sup>310</sup>

It seems quite right that he objects to the text being taken as an object divorced from the world and time. A text, a *textum*, is of course something 'woven' and we have every reason to think that the etymology of the word betrays its nature here, the interwoven intrinsic and extrinsic factors to which Wellek and Warren refer to more conventionally as word and spirit, free will and necessity.<sup>311</sup> The objection already made at some length in earlier chapters of the thesis to the misequation of tradition or the interpretative community with the relatively recent phenomenon of mass society need not be repeated here.

If the speciousness of this equation were not clear enough to the reader however, McGann obliges us by making the implications of his claim clearer yet. He defines poetry as:

a type of expression which forces its language to exhaust itself within the limits of the poetic experience as such. Poetic language, we say, is not directed to any extra-poetic use. But we must not take this correct idea to suggest that poetic experiences take place outside of history and specific social environments.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> McGann. *op. cit.* 18.

<sup>311</sup> Wellek & Warren. *Theory of Literature*. (1970).

<sup>312</sup> McGann. *op. cit.* 21.



A strange definition indeed. Poetry is indeed poetry and not anything else, nor is it particularly useful as anything else (as it is exhausted) but it is nonetheless ‘involved with extra-poetic operations,’ not generically as poetic language, but as ‘specific poetic utterances.’<sup>313</sup> It owes its genesis to society – indeed he argues it is wholly social – but it has no impact of its own on society in return. McGann’s theory of poetry replaces a specious notion of transcendent ‘poetic language’ with a specious notion of ‘transcendental society,’ which he only fails to see because he makes society to be so immanent. Society receives the same sort of false absolutisation in his hands as the organic work did in the New Critics and Deconstructionists. But the narrative of life and its processes persists (against the notions of art that would cast it in the model of making) as a universal answer to the various questions about life that writers raise.

In the end, most of McGann’s observations in his chapter on ‘Keats and Historical Method’ are completely out of tenor with the broad theoretical claim he makes about society and the role of the artist in it as a ‘social actor.’ They are aimed at demonstrating that what he argues of Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn also applies to an understanding of Keats in general: ‘that all current interpretations of the ode which treat the urn as an imaginary object are only justified on the basis of certain past historical research.’<sup>314</sup> The observations he makes, some of which I have included in my own reading of the poem above, tend to be those which argue for understanding the context in which the poem is written, its intended audience, etc.. The observations can be acute in themselves, and they merit better than his theory.

### *A Romantic Ironist*

The final perspective I shall examine, the Romantic Ironist, seizes upon the very fact that the answers to the questions of life given by the Romantic practice of poetry result in a vicious circle: in other words, they result in the the same terms of life and its processes. The critic I have chosen to represent it, David Simpson, in his fine book entitled Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry supplies perhaps an appropriate summary of the failings of some of the writers de Man attacks, though also those of de Man himself, as a practitioner of the ‘heuristic method’:

...the coalescence of subject and object...the avowed goal of so much aesthetic theory... is at the same time open to criticism or misuse as the tool of the intentionalist heresy, the digestion of circumference by centre...(and the practitioners of the) ‘heuristic method’ (who tend) towards complete abandonment of authorial control over the limits of possible interpretation.<sup>315</sup>

<sup>313</sup> ibid 21.

<sup>314</sup> ibid 44.

<sup>315</sup> David Simpson. Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry. (1979). 166.

As Simpson is acutely aware, the 'abandonment of authorial control' to the narrative of the processes of life constitutes nothing other than a loss of a coherent sense of authority – he catalogues, as I have, the crisis of self-legitimation that results from adopting such a framework and abandoning the 'exclusive sense' of authorship that the model of the artist as maker entails.

It is interesting to observe how this works itself out in practice in his criticism. In spite of his criticism of the characteristic failings of the New Critics and deconstructionist critics, Simpson's own reading of the ode adopts the *formal* postulate of Brooks, Guetti and others that there are at least two personae in the ode, that of a dramatic persona (speaker) and a controlling persona (poet/ Keats?) who comments at the poem's end. He largely ignores the attempt to read the poem in the *ekphrastic* tradition as *one* speaker confronting an object, but nonetheless understands it primarily as a self-reflexive projection. As he notes, this reading implicitly 'involves the reading mind in a confrontation with and refinement of its own intentions and ambitions.'<sup>316</sup> He can maintain this apparently contradictory stance of one speaker with different voices because he claims that Keats employed Romantic irony in the poem. 'The violent fluctuation between the speaker's various responses to the urn' go a long way towards corroborating such a reading of the ode in Simpson's view.

Simpson amasses various evidence that lends credence to an 'ironic' reading of the poem. The third stanza in particular is crucial to maintaining the viability of such a 'consciously distanced 'speaker'' because it operates as a point of equipoise between the poem's polarities. The best demonstration of multiple personae in the poem are presented by the different but equally tenable perspectives the critics themselves have taken on the third stanza. Here he cites Earl Wasserman's reading of the third stanza as the point at which the subject is most engaged in the 'life of the predicate'<sup>317</sup> and Cleanth Brooks's opposing view, that it is the point of highest irony and paradox,<sup>318</sup> as the possibility of representing the 'perspectives of speaker and poet respectively.'<sup>319</sup>

To support his ironic reading of the poem, Simpson also points out the relevance of Keats's choice of an *ode*. It had established connotations as a vehicle for inspired and natural poetic production. He reminds us to this end of Coleridge's trenchant observation that the form had become a vehicle for inferior writers to give vent to their passions in a 'startling

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<sup>316</sup> *ibid.* 8.

<sup>317</sup> Earl Wasserman. *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*. (1953). 31.

<sup>318</sup> Cleanth Brooks. *The Well-Wrought Urn*. (1947). 145.

<sup>319</sup> *ibid.* 9.

hysteric of weakness over-exerting itself, which bursts on the unprepared reader in sundry odes and apostrophes to abstract terms.' The supposition of two personae in the poem also allows us to account for various difficulties in the poem. For instance, it accounts for the negative reference to the 'ravishing' of the urn at the beginning of the poem (as an alliance of the poet with the urn against the speaker), as well as the problematic ending. He sees another instance of collaboration, which allows us to avoid trying to solve the problem posed by having variant versions of the Ode's ending of whether the final two lines or just the aphorism is 'spoken' by the urn: the poet is speaking for the urn.

The presence of dual voices in the ode also harmonises nicely with the sense of overdetermined closure, which Simpson conjectures Keats intentionally added to upset any reader who might attempt to unify the varying elements in the ode without having a Romantic sense of irony. For those tended to literal-mindedness and wanting to be told by the author what to think, Keats has constructed a barrier. Simpson suggests, quite perceptively I think, that what the urn 'says' at the end of the poem, in apparent contradiction to what it had previously said more ambiguously, could be precisely what Keats wanted to say to the reader of his poem. He proposes that:

Whereas the speaker is forced to recognise that the world will not respond to his desires and designs, Keats has already gone through the business of creating that world: this urn.<sup>320</sup>

The 'suppressed cyclic imperative' in the overdetermined closure of the ode is actually hinted at if we understand the reference to the 'still unravished' urn in the ode's first line to mean 'yet unravished.'

The urn appears as everything which the speaker is not, in a sort of negative justification of its identity. As soon as the 'real' urn is displaced, however, we can see that the creative predicament is really closer to that of the speaker than to that of the 'poet'; it is one where meaning does only come with the ardour of the pursuer, as things which are no-things take on life in the active imagination of the beholder. The efforts of the speaker thus become a repetition of the artist's pursuit. (13)

Most of the comments Simpson makes are excellent ones, and there is ample evidence for the reading he proposes.

Simpson's approach bases itself on the conclusions of arguments I made earlier asserting that the idea of order, as we observe it in our conceptual language, inevitably reduces itself to a model of cause-and-effect. As this is so, language does not simply assert causal relations so much as assume them and it simultaneously discredits arguments that cannot assert them. And I also agree entirely with Simpson's central thesis that 'causality is

replaced by simultaneity as 'history' is threatened by hermeneutics' in Romantic writing, a process that 'came to be extended from author to reader as a demand for moral self-determination.'<sup>321</sup> However, I have suggested throughout the thesis a more critical stance towards this development. I have questioned whether we should not be doing more than recovering 'authorial meaning,' as valuable as I agree that practice is to scholarship, if it bases itself on hermeneutic premises that will never allow it to become meaningful, i.e. the premises of the *Lebensphilosophie* whose nascence we can detect in Romantic poetry. Other tasks for the critic could be assigned. For example, since the *aporia* has been demonstrated to be an unavoidable aspect of Romantic poetics, must we not also look beyond the authors' claims to meaning, to the question of meaning in general in order to assess the individual instantiation of the universal? In other words, must we not look to theological answers to questions about man, rather than referring the questions back to the 'answers' provided by the 'life-processes' of man taken as prejudices? This is what I believe both Arendt and Coleridge convincingly argued in response to these developments.

For meaning is not restricted to the specific questions which authors ask, nor should a critic restrict himself to such limitations. Simpson argues that:

Romantic poetry is organised to make us confront the question of authority, especially as it pertains to the contract between author and reader.<sup>322</sup>

This statement may make the causal link somewhat too explicit, too purposive. It cannot be denied that this questioning of authority, and the consequent crisis of self-legitimation, is the effect of Romantic hermeneutics. But the question is whether questioning authority is the only intention of this practice. I have argued that the intention of such a practice of poetry (and of criticism) is at least as much to assert authority, the authority of the model of life conceived as an organic process. In other words, the claim of authority happens to occur in a self-debilitating way, but this does not argue against the fact that the primary intention is to be authoritative. It seems to me to be as such manifestly illogical, and invalid.

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<sup>320</sup> *ibid.* 12.

<sup>321</sup> *ibid.* Preface, ix-x.

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.* xi.

## Conclusion

This thesis could be seen as either conservative or radical in its assessment of the issues involved in ‘Silence and the Crisis of Self-Legitimation in English Romantic Poetry.’ It began with the contemporary hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer’s observation of Kant’s characteristic Enlightenment ‘prejudice against prejudice’ and his discussion of how that prejudice had led Kant to misunderstand and misrepresent the politically derived *sensus communis*. This led me to various observations about the effect of Kant’s universal perspective on the development of Romantic hermeneutics, which presented a subjectivised, historicised and, most significantly, ‘biologised’ form of his ‘common sense.’ Romantic hermeneutics enshrined what later hermeneuticists have called the *aporia* in the process of understanding. I traced the development of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher up until the present in the first chapter. A way out of the *aporia* seemed to me to require an alternative to that *universal perspective*, a perspective whose failings had only been exacerbated by their relocation in the hidden life-processes of the *animal laborans*.

To that end, I explored in the second chapter the subject of communication in relation to the terms and conditions of human life (differing from those suggested by universality) in more detail. I looked at Hannah Arendt’s discussion of The Human Condition, which compared and contrasted the view of the (post-)Enlightenment to the Classical and, to a lesser extent, Biblical tradition. Arendt emphasised the foundational *logocentric* conditions of the Greek *polis* in defining man, as Aristotle did, as a political and ‘logical’ being. So crucial was the *logos*’s implicit promotion of the idea of the essential *plurality* of the human condition to subsequent *political* understanding that it bound the Western notion of politics to the *words and deeds* of the *public sphere* from the time of the Greek city-state right up until the time of the Enlightenment. The product of this union is the cherished Western notion of ‘free speech,’ which associates the idea of freedom with the public disclosure of the human agent.

With the onset of Cartesian forms of universality, Arendt argued, a new form of ‘logic’ was introduced, analytic logic, which grew in influence with each discovery of the workings of forces behind the world of appearances that experimental science made. Analytic logic made no reference to either the fundamental human condition of plurality emphasised in the Classical and Biblical accounts or the world of appearances. In fact, the relations it promoted were no longer those between human agents, let alone free agents. They were the relations of thoughts to other thoughts in the mind. These thoughts were common in the sense that they could be repeated by anyone without regard for circumstances – not just in

the specific context of the public forum – and produce the same result. These new terms of logic thus appeared to offer a more fundamental perspective than that which had made reference to the world of appearances. The consequence of this however was that a new form of freedom was promoted, a freedom from prejudice. It was parasitic on the previous idea of freedom associated with language. The verbal sense of the word logic was the first and most lasting casualty of what eventually became known as the exercise of pure reason. But the primary, specifically human characteristics followed it shortly thereafter.

The new Cartesian concept and place of logic, divested from the public sphere and the place it reserved for man to disclose himself through words and deeds, also contained the seed of a new concept of man, a seed that germinated during the Enlightenment period. It finally emerged explicitly after the French Revolution with Kant's so-called 'anthropological question.' For Arendt, Kant's question of what man is is quite simply unanswerable. A man cannot jump over his own shadow. Nor can he be an object to himself without prejudicing the distinctive ideas of subject and object, and with them the distinction between man and the rest of the 'objects' in the world of appearances. Nonetheless, the impossibility of the task has not stopped thinkers since Kant from exploring this new and unanswerable question. Man's very resistance to self-definition has in fact acted as the lure and the goad of (post-) Romantic self-fashionings of the human. It informed the attempt that was made, again as Arendt argued it, to solve the problem of Cartesian dualism by looking at man as an organism, as *animal laborans*, rather than according to his traditional image as *homo faber*. But this move to organicism only reversed the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice' by making 'life' itself a universal prejudice. This did not stop the Enlightenment's attack on the notion of authority; it inverted it into a crisis of self-legitimation.

It has committed thinking to the unending process of defining man as 'something evermore about to be.' In this way, the imperative with which contemporary philosophy now approaches the anthropological question, defining humanity according to the fundamental prejudice of 'life' as 'self-interpreting animals,' demonstrates the continued prepossession of the hermeneutic *aporia*, of an answer to the questions about life being referred back to the answer of 'life.' The Romantics' emphasis upon silence and absence, expressed in their exemplary poetic interest in the literary fragment and in ironic imperatives to process, has maintained its resonance and its hegemony over what is now called postmodern thinking. Far from the oft-claimed absence of truth, postmodern discourse trumpets the truth of the prejudices of life. And with the declining belief in a Creator of life, the sense of the *unity* of life has increasingly ceded to a sense of diversity and insuperable difference – the 'truths' of

the prejudices of distinctive life-forms. The philosophy of the *animal laborans* has led not to a common sense, but to nonsense.

I have not explored the various negative implications of the new aesthetic (and the new concept of humanity) as fully as I might have. I have also left largely unexplored the tendency that mass society has shown since its onset in the eighteenth century to focus all human activities upon the maintenance and improvement of the essential life-processes. Much could have been said though. Politics has largely become a handmaiden of economics and its 'laws of the household,' ethics has increasingly concentrated on issues concerning the maintenance and amelioration of life rather than 'customs,' its traditional remit. These tendencies have only accelerated in recent years. Kantian notions of universality drive the movement towards the somewhat improperly designated 'global village' – its true location may be in 'cyberspace' – the Romantic hermeneutic of self-referential mental-processes writ large: Shelley's 'one mind.'

The same aesthetic that drives these universal centrifugal forces (which Arendt noted motivated the first satellite-scientists – as seen in their express desire for man to escape the earth and its biosphere as if it were a prison-house – can also be seen in the centripetal forces that motivate genetic exploration. Scientists' recent application of invasive techniques into the processes of life on a genetic level with the intention to ameliorate these processes (and maintain life) seems, like the move towards 'globalisation' and a 'world economy,' to beg deeper questions as to why this ought to happen and according to what definition of life. These questions appear particularly troublesome at the margins of life, i.e. at its beginning and end, where the current model of self-legitimizing life-processes seems most deficient. The self-legitimation of man only conceiving himself as *animal laborans* not only fails as a paradigm to capture the unique character of the spoken word to mobilise corporate human action, it fails to capture the essence of *events* such as birth and death. These questions are currently being left unanswered, I think precisely *because* the hegemonous concept of humanity applies the paradigm of self-fathering without questioning its own prejudices.

The absence which makes it imperceptible as a prejudice in a traditional sense makes it seem transparent. It can however be seen by its effects. Its dynamic commits the scientist to the process of exploration (for the benefit of 'society,' whose commitment to 'life' and its amelioration I traced), but never conclusion or discrimination. And yet issues are now being raised by contemporary science whose consequences one need not be a conservative or a radical to question, issues that must be referred back to this still relatively recent concept of humanity. These contemporary issues act to demonstrate, as Arendt contended, the

widespread 'rebellion against existence as it has been given' that the Romantic aesthetic entails. The truly universal forces that contemporary science harnesses without understanding them – *understanding* being possible only via language – may yet eradicate earthly life as it has been given, as a prejudice. To present it more ironically, the maintenance and amelioration of the life-processes by the power of universality now threatens life and its processes.

All of these issues appeared on a smaller scale as an apparently insignificant aesthetic debate between Coleridge and Wordsworth two centuries ago, which I dealt with in my third chapter. *Logocentricity* and its relation of the concept of man and his activities to the terms of his creation *in imago Dei* was the basis of Coleridge's attack on Wordsworth's poetic theory. It was the central pillar of Coleridge's theological definition of the primary imagination, his alternative to Wordsworth's Romantic hermeneutics. In that sense, the third chapter is not just in the middle of the thesis, but also the chapter that connects the central difficulty in contemporary hermeneutics, the *aporia* in the thinking of the *animal laborans*, with some of the central issues raised by the emphasis on silence in Romantic poetry: the issues of community, logic, anthropology and creativity. If we introduce the Coleridgean distinction between theoretical and practical criticism as a model, it could be said that my entire reading of the hermeneutic issues throughout the thesis was in a sense Coleridgean. His emphasis on logocentricity based its *theoretical* credibility on its appeal to the past and its basis in Christological dogma; and it has 'proved' its veracity *practically* by the emergence of the seemingly insurmountable hermeneutic *aporia* and its attendant manifestations in the present. The Romantic aesthetic has shown itself to propagate incomprehensibility and ensconce the heresy of 'life' in the heart of contemporary thinking, with no apparent way out.

The final three chapters demonstrated much the same in the Romantics' poetry. Wordsworth's silence suggested imperceptible beginnings and *felt* correspondences between himself and all of nature. His poetic appeal to a sense of unity, made in the context of the collapse of the *sensus communis* of a two-world schema, was essentially an appeal for a new type of common sense that I followed Arendt in characterising as intimacy, the felt connection of unity with 'nature.' Nonetheless, there was offence in such apparently innocent terms. For all the importance of the 'truths' Coleridge conceded Wordsworth to have captured in his theory, his tendency to refer his intimacy to universality and to nature led Coleridge to accuse him of 'the too exclusive attention to (truths) which had occasioned its errors by tempting him to carry those truths beyond their proper limits.' Wordsworth's adoption of a Kantian form of universality to 'life' as his truth had the effect of relating everything to a *mysterious* origin to which man himself corresponded, as if human existence



entailed no prejudices of agency. This resulted in his contradictory claims about man as essentially a spirit yet essentially a part of the natural world, the fusion of the two-world view I mentioned in the introduction into one. For Coleridge on the other hand, the sense of man being an *image* of his Creator continued to dominate. His definition of the primary imagination suggested for the areas of common sense, logic, anthropology and creativity such a continued relationship of copy to original: he held it as '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 infinite I AM.'

Shelley's treatment of Mont Blanc I explored primarily as a negative image of Coleridge's demonstration of the invalidity of Romantic hermeneutics' idea of 'one life': or, as a case study in futility as it were. Shelley's obscurity I saw rather less rosily than most of the contemporary critics I reviewed. I maintained the primary significance of the element of heresy in his writing, in terms of images, terminology and linguistic practice. All of these I took as symptoms of Shelley's revisionist notion of being made *in imago Dei*, and his imaginative consistency in seizing upon the radical consequences of the *animal laborans*. Causality was attacked radically in the poem, though the attack collapsed in the poem's conclusion where he lapsed into coherence, revealing that this was an alternative, organicist theological presentation. In it, he suggested a reversal of Coleridge's terms of the primary and secondary imagination, the dependence of the idea of God on human conception. Interestingly, this took place as a reversal of the Genesis account: Shelley suggested that man speaks God into being. However, there was more to Shelley's poem than that. Life, taken on its own terms, offers no opinions on the problem of evil. Shelley seemed much more concerned about this issue than Wordsworth, a concern reflected in the various dualistic/Gnostic heresies he attaches to his notions of life. Evil was a concern of Shelley's that allied uneasily with his organicism.

Finally, I looked at Keats and his confrontation of Enlightenment values of art from the perspective of 'life.' Keats seemed to me to demonstrate the unwillingness and incapacity of the artist conceiving himself in the terms of the *animal laborans* to comprehend art created by the *homo faber*, protesting against its failure to *be* what he conceived himself as, life. The speaker in the poem bore the marks of Wordsworth's conflation of the two-world view of man into a living, i.e. material spirit. As was the case in Shelley's Mont Blanc, the benefit of the new idea of art as a process of life was opposed to the idea of a silent maker of a silent object – an ironic attack on an object as transcendent whose true character was actually worldliness. I disagreed with the critical tradition for being confused on precisely that point. Approaching it from the philosophy of life, they uncritically interpreted the created poem, the

*work of art* it is, as a 'heuristic stimulus' for the reader to affirm the same play of life-processes, as a demonstration of the characteristic 'organic form' of art, or as a demonstration of 'the impossibility of reading.' This not only demonstrated the critics' understanding of themselves and their task of interpretation according the terms of the *animal laborans*, it showed their hermeneutic paradigm's incapacity to understand the capacity of art to break out of the vicious circle of life, and their unwillingness to esteem it as such. This manifested, it seemed to me, the evolution of the humanities in the twentieth century into a religion of life, for life's sake.

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