INTRODUCTION

The pragmatics of romantic idealism

O friend! Truth! Truth! but yet Charity! Charity!

Coleridge's plea comes in the midst of an 1804 notebook entry that characteristically combines self-mortification with self-justification. The poet confesses to 'Drunkenness' and 'sensuality', but begs his future reader to consider, in mitigation, that he 'never loved Evil for its own sake'.[1] 'Charity', he suggests, is the prerequisite for interpreting the 'Truth' of his life's work. The passage presents Coleridge at his most strategically disarming, yet it would be wrong to dismiss his appeal as wishful thinking or crafty manipulation. The request for trust, the assumption of generosity on the part of his reader, is no mere sleight of hand. By refusing to subordinate friendship and charity to an abstract idea of truth, Coleridge trades on a network of romantic ideas concerning the nature of the relationships between truth, charity, and friendship. This network, which forms the central interest of this study, can be characterised broadly as an interest in the interdependence of truth and intersubjectivity. More concisely, and contentiously, it can be described as a kind of pragmatism.

In choosing the last descriptor, I am not claiming that the writers discussed here are essentially pragmatists: as I argue below, the growth of naturalism in the nineteenth-century forms a formidable barrier between the romantics and pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey. When, for example, Coleridge defines the 'Ideal' as the 'union of the Universal and the Individual', he subjects the possibility of redescription to a transcendental ideal in a way that is quite alien to pragmatism.[2] This romantic tendency to idealise or hypostasise 'Truth' is well documented. However, modern criticism (largely thanks to its preoccupation with Hegel and German idealism), has fixated upon and internalised the romantic idealisation of truth to the exclusion of historical and alethic alternatives. Chief among the latter is a British discourse of communicative rationality that insists upon the inseparability of truth and dialogue, as well as the

embeddedness of all thought in social values, the normative weave of life. I argue that it is this discourse, captured by Coleridge's dictum that in the 'affectionate seeking after the truth' we must presuppose that 'Truth is the correlative of Being', which can be characterised as 'pragmatic' or 'holistic'.[3]

Stated plainly then, the argument of this book is that much modern criticism and commentary on romantic literature is written in the shadow of a bad romantic idea: the idealised or hypostasised notion of truth. Against this tendency, I highlight and defend a valuable but now marginalised romantic idea, a 'holistic' conception of truth and communication. In doing so, I adopt an openly normative approach that I see not only as unavoidable, but also as one way of putting the most helpful romantic ideas to work in historical interpretation. At its best, romantic writing shows how thought depends fundamentally upon dialogue and communication, and how dialogue in turn presupposes a shared concept of truth and a commensurable background of values. This tells us something important about the futility of subjecting the normativity of our beliefs to the radical suspicion fostered by what Thomas Pfau dubs the 'conspiratorial hermeneutics' of modern commentary.[4] It also highlights a point made recently by Nikolas Kompridis: namely, that the refusal to hypostasise the 'normative' (as in, for example, 'the romantic ideology') is the prerequisite for a future-orientated criticism of historical texts.[5] In other words, once we treat the normative dimension to our theories and beliefs from a pragmatic point of view, the romantics can be seen, in Richard Rorty's phrase, to 'enlarge the realm of possibility'. Viewed as good 'private' philosophers rather than poor 'public' ones, they enable us to imagine the experience of better possible futures.[6]

Reading Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats in this way also alerts us to the fact that finding a common ground between persons, cultures, and historical eras is the precondition, not the product, of interpretation. In other words, if we are to interpret the romantics at all, we are compelled to treat them as inhabiting a conceptual- and value-space that is at least commensurable (that is, comparable) with our own. Consequently, the method of the present study is 'romantic', not because of its 'immanence to' or 'transcendence of' a romantic paradigm, but because it rejects such terms as outworn and metaphysical. It sees no coherent alternative to interpretation based on the presuppositions of fallible truth-claims couched in an openly evaluative vocabulary.[7] Like the romantic discourse it describes then, the outlook of this book is reformist rather than revolutionary: it does not offer a *theory* of 'reading', 'truth', or 'romanticism'. Instead, it endeavours, in a piecemeal way, to counter, amend, and extend other

readings of Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge, and, in doing so, to recover a romantic concept of communicative action generally forgotten or discredited by modern criticism.[8]

This is not to say that the discourse of communicative rationality identified here has gone unnoticed. Kathleen Wheeler, Paul Hamilton, Angela Esterhammer, Richard Eldridge, Russell Goodman, and Jerome Christensen, among others, have all written books that stress the pragmatic, future-directed accent of romantic literature.[9] What remains to be explored, however, is *why* so much romantic writing appears to veer between a thoroughly pragmatic attitude towards truth, interpretation and self-description, and a propensity to hypostasise key concepts as transcendent ideals. I believe that such ambivalence is best explained against the background of two competing strains of British empiricism: representationalism, and a linguistic 'turn' in late eighteenth-century thought.

The first of these can be traced to the seminal 'idea' idea in Descartes and Locke, which centred the regulation of beliefs in the mind and made *contemplation* the defining characteristic of knowledge. As Rorty argues, Locke's move to identify belief-justification with the causal explanation of mental representations secured the priority of 'knowledge of' to 'knowledge that', and thus the primacy of 'knowledge as a relation between persons and objects rather than persons and propositions'.[10] This shift has profound consequences, not least of which is the reorientation of philosophy away from divinity and morality and towards epistemology, and the forging of a new discourse of idealism, dealing in 'faculties' of the 'imagination' and 'understanding', and the 'association' of 'ideas' and 'impressions'. From this point, as James Engell demonstrates, it is possible to narrate the surpassing of empiricism by romanticism as the inflation of an idealised mental sphere already present in the older tradition, that is, as the evolution of a naturalistic British representationalism into a supernaturalised Germanic idealism.[11]

It would be wrong to suppose, however, that representationalism passed uncriticised even within the schools of eighteenth-century empiricism. Thomas Reid's attack on the Lockean 'idea' idea is effectively an attack on epistemology itself as a way of thinking about the regulation of belief. By abandoning an epistemological apparatus of ideas and their causes for a linguistic model of natural and artificial 'signs', Reid lays the groundwork for a linguistics of knowledge.[12] Subsequently, as W. V. Quine notes, John Horne Tooke's etymological deconstruction of the 'idea', and Jeremy Bentham's 'shift of semantic focus from terms to

sentences' indicate a new willingness to think of knowledge in terms of communication and interpretation rather than representation and confrontation.[13] I argue further that when considered alongside the admissions by empiricists such as Hume and Dugald Stewart regarding the unsustainability of the representational model these developments indicate a powerful crosscurrent in late eighteenth-century thought. Towards the end of the century, the language of British empiricism (particularly within dissenting and radical circles) is increasingly antidualist and anti-representationalist. Consequently, it is less concerned with the problem of representing truth, and more with the problem of how truth operates within a community concerned with mutual understanding. This concern is illustrated in the 'Introduction on Taste', which opens the second edition of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*:

> On a superficial view, we may seem to differ very widely from each other in our reasonings, and no less in our pleasures: but notwithstanding this difference, which I think to be rather apparent than real, it is probable that the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures. For if there were not some principles of judgement as well as of sentiment common to all mankind, no hold could possibly be taken either on their reason or their passions, sufficient to maintain the ordinary correspondence of life.[14]

Burke's treatment of 'the standard of reason and Taste' as a problem for the pragmatics of communication rather than for epistemology or metaphysics suggests that truth is neither a 'thing' to be possessed, nor a 'context' about which one may or may not have a theory, but that which is 'sufficient to maintain the ordinary correspondence of life'.

This appeal to the pragmatic preconditions for dialogue represents a tradition that has been overshadowed by associationism and romantic theories of the imagination, overwhelmed by the introduction to Britain of German idealism, and generally overlooked by modern commentary and criticism. And yet, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats each inherits, absorbs, and modifies the linguistic and pragmatic turn of late eighteenth-century empiricism. In this new understanding of the intimate relationship between communication and the concept of truth, rational norms are aligned with the pragmatic boundaries determined by free discourse within the public sphere. Rejecting both subject-centred reason *and* hypostasised negations of reason, it attempts to give an account of the conditions of living a coherent life from *within* a coherent lifeworld, from within an inhabited framework of goods and values. In so doing, it

assumes that there is no 'truth' outside dialogue, but also that *because of this*, there can be no dialogue without a shared concept of truth.

HOLISM VERSUS HYPOSTASIS: 'SOCRATIC' EMPIRICISM

The difference between the two varieties of empiricism I distinguish reflects a debate in late eighteenth-century Britain over whether truth is an object that the mind strives to represent (sometimes referred to as the 'correspondence' theory of truth) or a human creation. The second idea is commonly seen as a distinguishing feature of romantic writing. Here, however, a further distinction needs to be drawn: between the idea of truth as the creation of the *mind*, and as the creation of *communication*. The first trades upon the idea of a centred subject, the second invokes the notion of intersubjectivity.

The romantics are conscious of this difference, not only through their schooling in a native philosophical tradition, but also thanks to their awareness of a similar ambiguity within Platonism. This ambiguity has been studied in a revealing essay by Donald Davidson. In 'Plato's Philosopher', Davidson writes of how he was once puzzled by the ancient philosopher's return to the Socratic dialogue in the *Philebus*, a method that Plato's later works had suggested 'might be supplemented or replaced by techniques with loftier aims'.[15] Davidson came to realise, however, that far from signalling a failure this absence of a clear and settled method illustrates Plato's idea of what Davidson elsewhere calls the 'holism of the mental'.[16] According this picture, as old beliefs are destroyed and new ones forged in the crucible of the Socratic dialogue, what emerges is an awareness of the *interdependence* of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and truth. For Socrates, Davidson argues, either all of these elements come into play at once, or none of them does.

Part of my argument is that tensions between representational/idealist and dialogic/pragmatic forms of late eighteenth-century empiricism, together with an analogous ambiguity in Platonism, alert the romantics to the 'holism of the mental'.[17] Kathleen Wheeler has made a similar point in her study of the relations between romanticism, pragmatism, and deconstruction, identifying in the work of Shelley and Coleridge a 'dynamic synthesis of Platonic/Socratic philosophy with empiricism'.[18] While I agree with this formulation, and extend it to Keats, I see the romantic attitude as more cautiously experimental than triumphantly synthetic. This is partly because I disagree with Wheeler on the relevance of German idealism when dealing with the philosophical discourse of British romanticism.

For Wheeler, romantic pragmatism/deconstruction is an umbrella category that unites Coleridge, Shelley, the German romantic ironists, and other antirationalist thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The problem with this view is that it implies that the Kantian, *transcendental* ground at stake in the work of all the German writers mentioned above is also (at least analogously) a focal concern of British romanticism, when, Coleridge aside, the concept of such a ground does not enter the mainstream of British intellectual life until the 1830s.[19] Consequently, I maintain that the 'Socratic empiricism' of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats is most usefully considered not in the context of transcendental idealism, but within a native tradition of empiricism torn between an idealism that preserves the dualism of subject and object (albeit often at the price of the object) and a new discourse of communicative rationality that stresses the role of language in shaping belief. It is this latter view of language that Angela Esterhammer describes as 'inherently pragmatic and dialogic'. The same discourse, as Russell Goodman and Richard Poirier argue, ultimately exerts a strong influence over American pragmatism.[20]

In overestimating the ability of German analogues to unpick the alethic ambiguities of British romanticism, Wheeler is following a well-trodden path. For at least half a century, Anglo-American criticism and commentary has generally considered the romantics as most philosophically interesting when read alongside their German contemporaries. It is difficult to overstate the consequences of this assumption, and two are of particular concern here. The first, already mentioned, is the eclipse of the linguistic empiricism of the late eighteenth century as a formative influence on romantic writing (tellingly, Wheeler does not consider the work of Reid, Tooke, or Bentham to be significant in her pragmatic/deconstructive reading of romanticism).

The second is an unwholesome preoccupation in much modern romantic criticism with reflexivity and the dynamics of 'immanence' and 'transcendence'. This preoccupation begins with Hegel's concept of immanent critique. As Jürgen Habermas argues, Hegel is the first thinker to diagnose the malady of modernity, an 'epoch that lives for the future', as the need '*to create its normativity out of itself*'. This need, he adds, 'explains the sensitiveness of its self-understanding', as the post-Kantian subject struggles with the responsibilities of self-redescription.[21] Hegel's immanent or dialectical critique is designed to overcome the Kantian gulf between spontaneity and reflection by reconstituting the subject as inherently relational. However, as Habermas argues, it is important to distinguish between the young Hegel, who based his metacritique of

'the authoritarian embodiments of a subject-centered reason', upon 'the unifying power of an intersubjectivity that appears under the titles of "love" and "life" ',[22] and the post-Jena Hegel, for whom the philosophical absolute is 'a further presumption under which alone philosophy can resume its business'.[23] Under the sign of the absolute, the later Hegel extends mistrust of subject-centred reason into a suspicion of epistemology itself. This effectively *radicalises*, at the same time that it ostensibly abolishes, the critique of knowledge, since the totalising or dialectical critique perpetuates, by inversion, the Enlightenment quest for a foundational discipline of thought: 'Hence what starts out as immanent critique covertly turns into abstract negation'.[24]

For Habermas, the outcome of this move is the denial 'to the self-understanding of modernity the possibility of a critique of modernity'.[25] Divested of its assurance of an absolute, metacritique as negativity abandons genuine understanding in favour of a hypostasised discourse of otherness, of 'truth/power', 'absent causation', and so on. Habermas demonstrates that this hypostasisation is inverted idealism, albeit one cramped by its inability to configure its own conclusions as epistemic gains. In this respect, modern thought, and particularly certain forms of postmodern theory and historiography, remains trapped within the shadow of German idealism. Modern romantic criticism is unusually sensitive to this confinement, in that the aporia in its own subject positioning is bound up in complex ways with its subject matter. Consequently, the dialectical methods invoked by postmodern historicism are beset by paradoxes of 'immanence' and 'transcendence', what Marjorie Levinson calls the dilemmas of 'empathy and contemplation'.[26] My argument here is that such impasses are avoidable, the unhappy descendants of the romantic idealisation of truth and Hegel's ambiguous radicalisation of the critique of knowledge.

WITHOUT THE 'OUTSIDE': DIALOGUE AND METACRITIQUE

Nonetheless, postmodern historicism's immersion in the language of 'immanence' and 'transcendence' reveals a great deal about how it remains spellbound by romantic idealism. Captivated by the image of a hypostasised otherness but lacking a basis for critique, it risks overlooking genuine romantic insights. Instead, it has become increasingly preoccupied with methodology, fixated on the metaphysical question of what is 'inside' and 'outside' romanticism. That we continue to struggle with the question of intellectual transcendence in the course of reading a literature that explores

such transcendence suggests to many not just that our self-conscious reading of romantic literature is caught in a hermeneutical circle, but that the hermeneutical circle *is* romanticism. If, as some have suggested, romanticism comes to signify not a doctrine but the very condition in which criticism operates, it becomes difficult to outmanoeuvre precisely because of the way in which it styles its own critique as self-overcoming.[27] Michael Scrivener captures such concerns in a string of questions in a recent review article: 'are we still reading Romanticism by means of its own constructions, or have we so far removed ourselves from the assumptions of Romantic texts that we are finally outside of Romanticism? Do we want to be outside of Romanticism? Is it possible to get outside of Romanticism? Are we finally free of Romantic ideology?'[28]

I argue that such metacritical questions are misconceived because the radicalised doubt that informs them is incoherent. Fear of repeated or 'reinscribed' romantic transcendence is merely an offshoot of a wider postmodern suspicion of truth. In seeking a context for thought itself, historicism's metacritique becomes what Fredric Jameson calls 'metacommentary': the attempt, by situating itself *outside* interpretation – in the 'strangeness, the unnaturalness, of the hermeneutic situation' – to explain 'not the nature of interpretation, but the need for it in the first place'.[29] Many critics position metacommentary in Foucault's zone of the 'unthought', where the dialectic between present and past is played out against the more fundamental otherness of a configuration of power and truth, itself the fundamental condition or 'historical *a priori*' of the western *episteme*.[30] Others, in turn, insist on subjecting *every* position to the labour of historical dialectic. As James Chandler has demonstrated, contextualising the very idea of intelligibility means that investigation must extend to historicism's *own* rubric of history and dialectic.[31]

If Habermas is correct, however, then the language of 'inside' and 'outside' is simply a remnant of the Hegelian radicalisation of epistemology. This has the merit of explaining why, as recent commentators have noticed, postmodern historicism is so uneasy in its own skin.[32] Untethered from critique, dialectic institutes a quasi-knowledge or anti-knowledge that vacillates between the detection and confession of cognitive contamination. The result is a criticism that, while searching for symptoms of givenness or failure of dialectic, always redeems itself through self-reflexive awareness – awareness that smacking immediately of transcendence only falls under further suspicion. This yields a paradox: on one hand, constantly reviewing one's own thought for symptoms of transcendence and ideological contamination itself draws the suspicion

of unacknowledged positivism (that is, of the assumption that ideology is an illusion that can be treated or weeded out); on the other hand, the very confession of one's ideological investment, one's cultural situatedness, can attract the very same suspicion (that is, of a disarming candour that promotes critical immunity). Between suspicion and confession, the voice of critique is lost.[33] Instead, as Paul Hamilton observes, by folding suspicion into suspicion, postmodern historicism invariably produces the kind of repetition it sets out to avoid: a critical chiasmus.[34]

The imperative here, then, is not to enable a critique of idealism that is somehow resistant to the remainders of idealism, but to avoid constructing a self-immunising metacommentary that repeats (by inversion) the hypostasising manoeuvre that makes idealism problematic in the first place. This means giving up the idea that 'difference', 'negativity', 'totality' or other signs of radical otherness are trump cards in the language game of interpretation. I argue instead that we should accept Rorty's argument that rationality is 'a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with a nonhuman reality'.[35] Rethinking objectivity as intersubjectivity means taking seriously the idea that when it comes to truth 'there is only the dialogue'.[36] One casualty of this arrangement is the goal of immanent critique: if thought has no radical exteriority, it makes no sense to think of interpretation as either 'immanent' or 'transcendent'. A second consequence is the rehabilitation of the concept of truth, albeit hypostasised in the weakest possible way as the indefinable absolute of discourse (if, as Davidson claims, truth has no explanatory use, we can, in Rorty's words, 'safely get along with less philosophising about truth than we had thought we needed').[37]

Some critics deplore this move, claiming that pragmatism's insistence on translatability and communicability is precisely what renders it inadequate as an aesthetic theory. Charles Altieri, for example, argues that pragmatism is ill-equipped to explain the relationships we have with certain objects, such as works of art, which do not have practical designs upon us. In particular, he claims, it lacks a 'powerful language for dealing with the otherness of objects from the past, or of objects which set themselves goals alien to pragmatist principles'.[38] Altieri contrasts the pragmatist's limited lexicon of otherness with that of Hegel, whose 'concern for what cannot be treated as "truth" per se, except dialectically, … provides us a stance from which we might be able to characterize why artists labor to get something right as a highly worked singular project'. Compared to Hegel's approach, he maintains, Rorty and Davidson's

assertions regarding the futility of metatheories of truth effectively silences fundamental dialogues (between cultures, as well as between individuals and art objects) before they can begin, producing 'an Occam's razor that risks becoming an instrument of cultural castration'.[39] The basic flaw in Rorty's approach to poetry, Altieri complains, is the former's assumption that the value and meaning of aesthetic performance can readily be cashed out into hypothetical statement.

Altieri's critique, however, offers a limited picture of the ways in which pragmatic approaches to problems of truth and interpretation might engage with artistic and literary works. In fact, the concern of thinkers like Rorty, Putnam, and Davidson with translatability is not heretically paraphrastic. Their approaches neither insist upon propositional articulacy nor disregard the performative or non-sentenceable features of aesthetic objects. Instead, they merely demonstrate that the commensurability of such features with the interpretive practices of the reader or spectator is itself a precondition of interpretation and critique. In contrast, Altieri's method implies that truth can be treated from the 'outside' as well as the 'inside'. In doing so, it subjects the ways upon which literary and artistic works communicate to a hypostasised otherness that renders interpretation simultaneously aporetic and dialectically negotiable. If what is gained in this picture is a critical language that gestures towards vague ideas of singularity and the 'self-reflexive structurings of imaginative energies', what is lost is the idea of constructive critique and the notion of art as, fundamentally, a form of communication.[40]

Another unwelcome consequence of Altieri's insistence on the untranslatable and therefore incommunicable power of aesthetic objects has more immediate relevance to the present inquiry. Like other attempts to account for the power of the aesthetic through notions of radical otherness, Altieri's critique harbours a resistance to *involvement* with different cultures and historical eras. And yet, it is this very sense of involvement that Poirier identifies in Emerson's claim that historical thinking always involves an acknowledgement of shared reality. 'Far from suggesting that we work our way into the past so as to recognize its otherness', Poirier notes, Emerson argues that history 'forces upon us a recognition of likeness, a participation in past productions, however monstrous these may be'.[41] Such recognition stems from Emerson's holism, his understanding that agents, actions, and words work altogether or not at all, and that 'each discovers . . . an inconvenient dependency on the others, and a disconcerting necessity, therefore, to move on to the next transition, toward a similar but again only temporary fusion'.[42]