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INTRODUCTION: TWO FACES OF ROMANTICISM

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.
BLAKE

What matters in life is life itself and not some other thing that life leads to.
GOETHE

...sure a poet is a sage;
A humanist, physician to all men.
KEATS

Romanticism, as almost any mention of the Romantic philosophers and poets is likely to remind us, was a spiritual revolt, a Promethean conspiracy to steal fire from the gods and to use it to drive them from their stronghold. The fire was consciousness, and it was mankind who would be installed in the gods' place. Romanticism looks forward to Marxism, to psychoanalysis, and to every significant modern attempt to persuade men to take control of their own destiny. Man, Feuerbach said, "is the beginning, the middle and the end of religion."[1] "In man," said Nietzsche, "there is both the creator and the thing created."[2] Even more than the rather mechanical atheism which preceded it, Romanticism made possible a realistic engagement with humanity's problems, because it was with Romanticism that men began to grasp the seriousness of what they were doing in questioning their long-sacred beliefs – and yet remained determined to go on doing so. For too much of their history men had "forgotten" – as Blake claimed to be reminding us – the simple truth that "All deities reside in the human breast."[3]

But the gods, for Blake, were not dead. They resided in the human

[1] See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957), p. xix.
[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 225.
[3] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 153.

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breast as they always had done. Like Pascal, Blake knew that there is no salvation for us in mechanistic science and that the heart has reasons of which Reason knows nothing. He also knew that the gods in the human breast are stranger than any yet recorded in scriptures, and that there are devils among them. To know them for what they are, we must hear what they have to say. There is a second face of Romanticism, which looks backwards for its inspiration to religion, and which encourages us not towards mastery but towards submission. "All that is visible clings to the invisible," said Novalis.[4] A time may come, Coleridge hoped, when "passiveness" will attain the dignity of "worthy activity."[5] Keats admired what he called negative capability, "that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[6] (One must learn, Rilke told one of his correspondents nearly a century later, "to have patience with everything unsolved in one's heart and try to love the questions themselves."[7]) We know by now, life being what it is – and even more importantly, perhaps, what we have made of it – that this second side of Romanticism is also its darker side.

Was it inevitable that these Romantic aspirations should conflict and lead in different directions? There was a time when it seemed not. For Goethe – "that uncrowned king of Romantics," as the English critic Owen Barfield persuasively called him[8] – it was reasonable to suppose that heroism and submissiveness might complement one another, and that they might do so above all through art. Art, Goethe believed, was at the service of life. If art expressed despair, it also enabled men to comprehend despair and to rise above it. Readers of *Werther* were not meant to go away and commit suicide. Keats, at a not entirely different crossroads in England, came round to an essentially similar point of view. The negative capability which he admired was the quality which "went to form a man of achievement," and he added "especially in literature" as though achievement in literature was only a part of what he had in mind.

[4] Novalis, *Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. R. Samuel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), p. 650.
[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks* vol. 1, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), entry 1834.
[6] John Keats, letter to George and Tom Keats of 21 December 1817.
[7] Rainer Maria Rilke, letter to Franz-Xaver Kappus of 16 July 1903.
[8] Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), p. 16.

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For both Goethe and Keats, remote from each other in so many ways and yet in some ways so strangely comparable, the purpose of art lay in its value for life, while the purpose of life – as Goethe said – was life itself. Art, and a man's talent, might need solitude for their development, but character was formed in society. Life, for Keats, was a "vale of soul-making" in which misfortunes gave us an opportunity to try the resources of our spirit. This seemed to him a "grander system of salvation" than the Christian religion, and one "which does not affront our reason and humanity."[9] Both Goethe and Keats, disgusted by the vulgar superstitions of Christianity, looked forward to a time when art would replace religion altogether as our most original and essential source of spiritual nourishment.

[9] Keats, letter to George and Georgiana Keats of 21 April 1819.

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1

SAUSSURIAN THEORY AND THE ABOLITION OF REALITY

> In this condition there may be discoverable under new forms certain spiritual illuminations, shining with a morality essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preoccupations. It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single, new word, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward.
>
> HART CRANE

1

The founder of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure – on whose insights into the nature of signs and language the greater part of the French and American literary theory of the past two decades has rather perilously come to depend – based the main arguments of his project for a newly scientific study of language on what are in fact a pair of philosophical axioms. These are: (1) what Saussure called his "Principle 1," or "*the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign*";[1] and (2) what might be called (though Saussure himself did not name or isolate it as such) "*the principle of the relational nature of all linguistic meaning*." In his argument leading up to the statement of "Principle 1" Saussure remarks that

> [s]ome people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing

[1] F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from notes based on Saussure's lectures of 1906–11, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974), p. 68; italics added.

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> that it names... This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words.
>
> (p. 65)

The truth is rather (Saussure proposes) that the linguistic sign unites "not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (p. 66). The real significance of "Principle I" within Saussurian theory lies not so much in the arbitrariness of the link between the "sound-image" and the "concept" – which Saussure goes on to speak of as the "signifier" and the "signified" (p. 67) – but in the fact that since the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between words and worldly things is "open to criticism" there must be a sense in which our very concepts themselves, along with the sounds which we use to signify them, can be seen as inherently arbitrary rather than as determined in their form by any "natural" or extra-linguistically-given relationship to reality. It is this philosophically radical assertion which provides the basis for the second main Saussurian principle concerning the *relational* nature of all linguistic meaning. Linguistic signs, since they do not have their meanings by virtue of one-to-one correspondence with things in the world (or therefore with the ideas of things which people may have in their minds), must therefore have their meanings by virtue of their relationships with other signs within the linguistic systems of which they form a part. "It is evident," Saussure argues,

> even *a priori*, that a segment of language can never in the final analysis be based on anything except its non-coincidence with the rest. *Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative qualities... Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language ... there are only differences *without positive terms*.
>
> (pp. 118–20)

Perhaps the most profound of the philosophical difficulties which these Saussurian principles are capable of leading us into comes from the fact that what Saussure regarded, at any rate primarily, as a set of regulative principles for the reform of language *studies* – a setting of the linguistic scientists' house in order (together with perhaps a notable "semiological" extension of the size of that house[2] – has been

[2] "*A science that studies the life of signs within society* is conceivable... I shall call it semiology... Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology" (p. 16).

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interpreted by Saussurian theorists as an exhaustive and (give or take certain qualifications) philosophically incontestable account of the essential *nature* of language itself. This never-properly-acknowledged shift of emphasis has made it possible for the most basic of the Saussurian principles – "the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign" (Saussure claims at one point that "no one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign" [p. 68]) – to take on a charisma which it has never been obliged to earn by any properly philosophical argument, and which properly philosophical argument would in fact show to rest on a set of verbal ambiguities which conceal what is at bottom a fairly simple philosophical fallacy. What the fallacy amounts to, in the most naked and un-semiological of terms, is that from the idea that language, or our utilizing of linguistic signs, is not a kind of "naming-process" in the sense of being a baptismal labeling of already-discriminated ideas or objects in the world (so that we should have to presuppose the world to be already discriminated into objects before we ever come to apply our language to it), a transition is made to the idea that the relationship between language and the world is not, and does not need to be thought of as including or comprising, a kind of "naming-process" in any sense whatever. From the idea that words do not have their meanings by virtue of their one-to-one correspondences with items in reality, it is inferred *tout court* that language cannot be held to relate in an intelligible or usefully discussable way with any extra-linguistic dimension or "presence" in reality at all.

2

The function of the linguistic sign, Saussure tells us, is not one of uniting a verbal name with a pre-verbally differentiated item in the world, because – *inter alia* – this would oblige us to assume "that ready-made ideas exist before words." By "ready-made ideas" Saussure evidently enough means "ready-made ideas" of things or objects, rather than the merely fragmentary or not-yet-structured "ideas" of the senses (in the special meaning of "ideas" with which the word was used by empiricist philosophers such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume). It might be as well, perhaps, to get in at the philosophical deep end here and to recall that it was a large part of Kant's enterprise in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to try to work out the

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implications of this (as he also saw it to be) impossibility of the existence of "ready-made ideas" which are somehow available to us antecedently to our possession of conceptual language. Recognizing that Hume had been right when he pointed out that the conception of human knowledge as based on a mental associating of passively received sensory data leaves us with an insoluble problem about what it is that holds the experiencing or mentally-associating agent himself together, Kant turned Hume's problem around and proposed that perceptual experience of a stable and persisting world can in fact only be possible if there already (in some way independently of the senses) exists a unified and unifying perceiver or consciousness to whom such a perceptual experience of enduring worldly objects can belong or appertain. After much argument Kant concluded that it must be through our exercise of the "logical functions of judgement" that such a unified and unifying consciousness is enabled to come into existence: it is only through our possession of certain *concepts* of "the objects of experience" that we are able to possess the unity of consciousness which is necessary in order for our experience to be experience at all.[3] A more linguistically sophisticated argument to establish the dependence of our capacity for perceptual experience on our possession of publicly-shared concepts was developed later by Wittgenstein, when he showed that the recognition of a perceptual similarity or distinction – and therefore any actual *perception* of anything at all – must depend on the publicly-established "rule" or "rules" which we are following when we make particular discriminations, and that it is only because I belong to a community of concept-using experiencers whose concept-using can (in some sense) be publicly observed that I can ever actually have any experience of my own. For both Kant and Wittgenstein, we can only have the experience – which we indisputably do have – of a world of things and persons (including ourselves) if we are already in possession of conceptual language.[4]

If we were to bring this Kantian or Wittgensteinian line of argument to bear within the Saussurian tradition of linguistic

[3] It will be argued below that Kant has here succeeded in identifying some, but not all, of the necessary conditions which underlie our capacity for self-conscious or objective experience.

[4] Both Kant and Wittgenstein are using what Kant called "transcendental" argument: they are asking what must be the case in order for us to be able to have the kind of experience which we in fact do have.

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theory, we could say that if the possibility of linguistic signs depended on the possibility of the linking-up of words with "ready-made ideas" of worldly objects, so that some kind of baptismal "naming-process" had to be seen as underlying all the connections between our concepts and the items in the world that they refer to, then it would never have been possible for our conceptual language to have got off the ground in the first place. It would never have been possible for us to have had the necessary experience of things *independently* of language, since our very consciousness as experiencing agents is itself dependent on our possession of concepts. Saussure, evidently taking the conclusions of some such argument for granted, proceeds from this rejection of the (in effect pre-Kantian) notion that "ready-made ideas exist before words" to his own – and for his own purposes more productive – notion that what the linguistic sign does is not to link a word with a ready-made idea but to link a sound-image with a concept. He then goes on to tell us new and revealing things about sound-images and concepts: most importantly that they have their meanings, or linguistic "values," not by virtue of their relationships with things or objects in the world, but by virtue of the relationships in which they stand within the language-systems of which they are constituent units. *But reality itself, meanwhile, has come very near to being forgotten about altogether.* Within the defining terms of Saussurian theory, all possible questions about how our concepts – whether signified by "sound-images" or by other textual signifiers – relate to any term or dimension which lies *outside* language are left with no alternative but to lapse from the argument as undiscussable. (For Kant, at any rate in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this can scarcely be seen as a problem, since reality "in itself" is defined from the start as being beyond the purview of our conceptual understanding.)[5] It is as though the rejection of a *wrong* answer to such questions proved the questions themselves to be entirely misconceived or illegitimate. Later Saussurian (or "post-Saussurian") theorists have sometimes argued as though any attempt to frame questions about the relationship between conceptual language and a dimension of reality which is exterior to language must be swept aside as evidence of our continued enslavement to outdated metaphysical or ontological

[5] This is the doctrine of the human inaccessibility of "things in themselves." P. F. Strawson has spoken rather tartly of Kant's "senseless dogma that our conceptual scheme corresponds at no point with Reality" (*The Bounds of Sense* [London: Methuen, 1966], p. 42).

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notions.[6] And yet no convincing argument as to why such metaphysical or ontological notions might be outdated (or as to which of them either are or are not outdated) has ever been put forward. The result has been the creation of a metaphysical or ontological void (or perhaps the seeming legitimization of a metaphysical or ontological void which existed at the heart of our culture already) in which Saussurian theory can guiltlessly disport itself, but in which we are also deprived of any conceptual basis for getting nearer to an understanding of – or (which is where any understanding would have to begin from) even for taking an interest in – the nature of truth.[7]

We can see this more clearly, perhaps, if we look at some of the implications of the commonly followed distinction which was made by Saussure between *langue* (a language's relational system proper) and *parole* (our various particular speech-acts, including all the particular sound-qualities and psychological components which may feature in individual speech-acts but which are nevertheless not a part of the language's relational system). The main philosophical problem to which this distinction gives rise is that the theoretical splitting-apart of *langue* and *parole*, together with the Saussurian tendency to concentrate on the *langue* or system as the most interesting or important-to-study part of language, makes it virtually impossible for our actual *using* – within our living, worldly situations – of language to be recognized as a part of its essential nature rather than as something to be hived off into a different realm for empirical study (a less glamorous realm of psychological accompaniments, "phonology" and noises *per se*, and in general of *behavior*). The effects of this displacement of emphasis from the necessarily situated or embodied nature of language (language being a special part of our situated and embodied human "forms of life" in general)[8] must – whatever the pedagogical usefulness of the distinction for the purposes of linguistic *studies* – in the end be philosophically disas-

[6] See in particular Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973); also Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

[7] At this point it might be best just to register one's *awareness* of some of the recent neo-pragmatist arguments about this last concept. See for example Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), *passim*.

[8] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), pp. 8–12, and *passim*.

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trous. It has been claimed by recent semiological commentators that the result of the Saussurian revolution in linguistic theory has been to give linguistics "a suitable object of study";[9] but if we adhere to the Saussurian distinctions as anything more than academically useful prescriptions we shall in fact find that Saussurian theory has given us a suitable object of study only by giving us an object of study which is incoherently abstracted from the nature of language as a living process and which is therefore without any real philosophical or human significance. (More accurately, we might say: by giving us an object of study which has the same degree, and same kind, of human significance that logic has.) The Saussurian categories make it easy for us to ignore our actual language-using *activity*; and between the relational, or what Saussure calls "synchronic" aspects of language (which are its aspects as a system, complete at any particular present moment), and the historical or behavioral, or what Saussure calls "diachronic" aspects (which are a matter of contingent facts about linguistic changes which occur with the passage of time), the true nature of the language-using process and of its place in human life can very easily be allowed to slip away out of the picture altogether. This may be unimportant if we are concerned only with the proper methods of studying actual language systems, but it cannot be unimportant if we are purporting to argue about the nature of language itself – as a dimension of human existence – and of its way (or ways) of relating to reality.

Since the time of Saussure a great deal of discussion has taken place about the nature of the *langue/parole* (and the synchronic/diachronic) distinction and about which of the components of our actual language-using might be assigned to which category, but none of it has altered the fact that any truly Saussurian theory can in the end only provide us with a "suitable object" of linguistic study which is at the same time an artificial or dead object.[10] The most radical of the reasons for this lies in the fact that in order to create a linguistic object of study on Saussurian principles at all, our necessary nature as embodied or incarnated beings (and more generally, all actual *context*, both physical–biological and cultural–historical) must necessarily be excluded from the discussion as irrelevant. In Saussurian terms, one of the distinctions we are called upon to make

[9] Jonathan Culler, for example, puts it this way in his *Saussure* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 27.
[10] Derrida's very important departures from Saussure are discussed below.

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