# *Introduction: Romanticism's knowing ways*

> Philosophy inspires much unhappy love.
>
> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*[1]

## ROMANTIC INDIFFERENTISM

The principal argument of this book is that English Romantic writing has a deep investment in the problem of knowledge, even as it attempts to conceal that involvement, and that it represents the first major attempt in Britain to retrieve philosophical thought from its confinement, first by Hume, then by Reid and the Scottish philosophers of common sense, to the margins of experience. The manner in which this retrieval is carried through, moreover, establishes a pattern for the treatment of knowledge which has been broadly followed by English-language philosophy to the present day. Paradoxically, part of that pattern is a denial of interest in epistemological questions, a cultivated indifference which is itself parasitic upon an urgent engagement with the twin questions of what, and how one knows.

Kant complained in his Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 that, caught between a despotic rationalism and an anarchic scepticism, the predominant attitude of late eighteenth-century thought towards the problem of knowledge had become what he called, using an English term, one of 'indifferentism'.[2] English Romanticism internalizes and continues this indifference to knowing. Lamb admitted in a 1810 letter to Thomas Manning that '[n]othing puzzles me more than time and space, and yet nothing puzzles me less, for I never think about them'.[3] Yet the ambivalence of the English Romantics to the question of knowledge is attested to by the very term 'Romantic philosophy' – or, more precisely, 'Romantic epistemology' – which can sound at one moment like an oxymoron, and the next a tautology. On one hand, it is generally acknowledged that within the loose assemblage of family

resemblances which characterize English Romantic writing, a preoccupation with knowledge – or rather, to signal its preference for active over static paradigms, *knowing* – is one of the most widely shared. Indeed, at least since the publication of M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* almost half a century ago, it has been a commonplace that the restructuring of knowing constitutes Romanticism's primary movement.[4] On the other hand, also recognised (though perhaps not as widely) is the way in which, at the same time, it places *theory* of knowledge under erasure, replacing it with discourses of emotional engagement, the exertion of power, or the striving of the will. Yet the uncertain manner in which this transposition is effected raises problems. In particular, one question which has occupied commentators for the past thirty years is whether the Romantic refashioning of cognition represents a break with western foundationalism and logocentrism, or merely a continuance of it by other means. Paul de Man and Kathleen Wheeler, for instance, see Romantic irony as inherently subversive and self-deconstructing. For them, the Romantic consciousness 'consists of the presence of nothingness [...].'[5] Alternatively, Tilottama Rajan and Richard Rorty detect, despite this, a positivist nostalgia for knowing; countering that, in Rajan's words, Romantic writers 'almost never [...] reach that zero degree of self-mystification envisaged by de Man [...]'.[6]

The peculiarity of the problem which Romanticism simultaneously faces and effaces is that it is one which, having developed within epistemology, rebounds upon the discipline itself. At root, it is the direct consequence of Hume's separation of truth and value. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume had reduced all statements which were capable of being true or false to an exhaustive dual grid of logical and empirical propositions: 'Truth or falsehood,' he asserts, 'consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false [...].'[7] This division of knowledge forms the basis for the *Enquiries*' notorious incendiary injunction regarding those works of 'sophistry and illusion' which would exceed this grid, as well as for later attempts by logical positivists to map the conditions of meaning.[8] The important consequence for Hume, however, was that among those statements which clearly fell outside the twofold epistemic cell of matters of fact and the relations of ideas were those concerning *value*. Value judgements, he concluded, were non-epistemic. They expressed attitudes about how the world 'ought' to be, rather than assertions regarding how the world 'is', and therefore could

be neither true nor false. Having being led by his first dichotomy into this second, far more worrying one, Hume found himself advocating the relegation of philosophy, in the form of inquiry into the foundations of knowledge, from the kind of everyday lived experience which was inherently value-rich. Thus, for Hume and his successors such as Reid and Beattie, epistemological attempts to justify values gave way to *naturalistic* accounts of values. In this light, Hume's declaration that the threat of '*total* scepticism' was a 'superfluous' question, since 'Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel [...]' was tantamount to an admission that traditional philosophy had marginalized itself from the mainstream of human concerns, or 'common sense'.[9] At the same time, two questions nigglingly remained: first, regarding whether human beings were (naturalistically speaking) necessarily determined to philosophize in a non-naturalistic way; and second, whether scepticism was, in turn, as inevitable to that kind of philosophical thinking as breathing and feeling were to everyday life.

By reacting against Hume's notion of the divided life and endeavouring to heal the rift between knowledge and value, or between philosophical doubt and an acceptance of the unreflective certainties of ordinary experience, English Romanticism accepts the challenge of the philosophical sceptic. But rather than meeting this challenge on the sceptic's own grounds within philosophy, or reverting to a Scottish naturalism which rejects the attempt to put knowledge (and, by extension, the subject) 'first', Romantic discourse develops an alternating pattern of engagement with, and abstention from philosophical argument. Michael Cooke expressed this condition – which, following Morse Peckham, he saw as resulting from the 'explanatory collapse' of Romanticism – as its 'philosophy of inclusion', whereby argument and consensus are fused in a process which involves 'an argument *with*, using the double force of the preposition to suggest at once resistance and sharing'.[10] My argument, however, while itself sharing a field of concern with Cooke's, stresses the agonistic nature of Romantic ambivalence. It is the conflict of its commitment *and* indifference to justification which manifests Romanticism's rebellious dependency upon the foundations of knowledge, and upon the Cartesian tradition of the science of knowledge as foundational to all others.

Since the term 'foundationalism' and its corollaries are central to what proceeds, some initial clarification of usage is called for. Roughly speaking, there are two senses of the term: a technical one used by

modern philosophers working within the Anglophone tradition, and a more general one, which the same philosophers are apt to deplore. The first application, which might be called 'justificatory' foundationalism, confines itself to giving an ostensibly factual account of the structure of any individual's system of *justified beliefs*. At its plainest, it claims that all inferential reasoning ends in a noninferential ground; in other words, that all *mediately* justified beliefs (beliefs justified by other beliefs) are ultimately justified by *immediately* justified beliefs (beliefs which require no other beliefs for their justification). What exercises foundationalists of this sort, and provides much of the force behind their argument, is the twin-spectre of circularity or infinite regress in human reasoning. Without some kind of foundational structure, it is argued, epistemic deliberation looks like pointless tail-chasing, a search for an endlessly deferred justification. Consequently, the language of foundationalism is coloured by metaphors of stability, linearity and closure. Terms such as 'grounds', 'ends', 'first principles' or 'sense-datum' are not uncommon.

Beyond the specialized discourse of Anglo-American epistemology, however, other commentators have noted that such fears and figures also infect broader traditions within western philosophy, dating back to Aristotle and Plato. From Descartes until the middle of the twentieth century the dominant view of philosophy itself has rested upon the epistemological search for certainty in self-evident foundations, whether in the intuitive deduction of the Cartesian *cogito*, Kant's transcendental conditions of experience, or logical positivism's notion of incorrigible sense-data. At the heart of this search is the conviction, not just that justified belief is foundational in structure, but that *true* justified belief or (leaving aside Gettier-type problems[11]) knowledge itself is foundational. This kind of 'epistemic' foundationalism forms the second sense of the term, one which, despite having been forced onto its back foot for much of the twentieth century, English-language philosophy has been rather more reluctant to question. Even foundationalism's classic opponent, coherentism, which against the 'bricks-and-mortar' model proposes a holistic, 'spider's web' structure of mutually supporting beliefs, is more commonly advocated within a justificatory than within an epistemic context.[12] Those who have sought to roll back the influence of foundationalism in other disciplines, meanwhile, have been reluctant to reject it outright. Kuhn, for instance, having accounted for scientific progress as a process of immanent paradigm-shift, nonetheless found the foundationalist presumption that scientific theories are 'simply man-made interpretations of given data [. . .] impossible to relinquish

entirely [. . .]'.[13] Similarly, in ethics, Bernard Williams' attack on the foundationalist 'linear search for reasons' which can itself only end with 'an unrationalized principle'[14] is limited to ethical theory, and not extended to the natural sciences, which in his view remain 'capable of objective truth'.[15]

The reasons for this cautiousness are not difficult to understand. For unlike the first, the fate of this second, more general kind of foundationalism is tightly bound with that of philosophy itself. Without the Cartesian notion that knowledge can ground itself in the apprehension of a truth simple and transparent, together with the Kantian ruling that the mode of this knowledge sets limits on all empiricial deliberation, the priority of 'knowledge' itself in human life is open to challenge. If foundational metaphors for truth and knowledge come to be seen as optional, then, as Rorty points out, 'so is epistemology, and so is philosophy as it has understood itself since the middle of the last century'.[16] In this way, the reasons behind why the interrogation of this 'epistemic' sense of foundationalism attracts the hostility of many Anglo-American philosophers are the same as those which make this sense, rather than the first, the object of the present enquiry. For it is often claimed that Hegel is the first seriously to challenge Descartes' elevation of knowledge on an escalating process of doubt, countering in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* that 'it is hard to see why we should not turn round and mistrust this very mistrust'.[17] In their own way, however, the Scottish naturalists had already made a comparable move, while in Germany Jacobi had long maintained his anti-philosophical conviction that '[e]very avenue of demonstration ends up in fatalism', albeit not without discomfort, given his own addiction to argumentation.[18] I want to argue that in a similar way, by seeking at once to refute and ignore Hume, oscillating uneasily between 'fact' and 'value', 'philosophy' and 'life', the English Romantics, almost without realizing it (and afterwards with some ambivalence), challenged the boundaries of foundationalism.

English Romanticism thus contains the same knot of concerns which have unwound into an ongoing ambivalence in Anglophone philosophy about the value of 'first philosophy'; an equivocation, however, which remains distinct from the more comprehensive rejection of epistemology urged by Franco-German thought since Heidegger. Moreover, in its fluctuating course between seeking and resisting knowledge, Romanticism formulates the first but enduring creed for non-foundationalists generally from Nietzsche to Rorty: the dictum that, in Nietzsche's phrase, Truth is not 'something there', but something 'created'.[19]

## SERPENT AND LOGOS: CREATION VS. FOUNDATION

At the centre of this issue, and so far somewhat neglected, are two related developments in England at the end of the eighteenth century. The first is the rise of the poet as a philosophical innovator following the subduing of conventional epistemology by scepticism. Mid and late eighteenth-century British philosophy was burdened with a barely voiced view that there may indeed be no response to Hume, and thus no answer to the 'problem' of knowledge. Monboddo gravely surmised in 1779 that to agree with Hume was to accept that 'there can be no science nor knowledge of any kind'.[20] This was, in many respects, a tacit acceptance that on his own ground the sceptic was unanswerable; in Jacobi's words, 'that there is no arguing against' or 'no defeating the *upper or full blown idealist à la Hume* [...]'.[21] For Monboddo, the obvious remedy for this, and indeed the only recourse for theism, was to return to the metaphysical systems of ancient Greece, yet even he was forced to concede, ruefully, that 'Metaphysics [...] are, at present, in great disrepute among men of sense [...].'[22] There was no high-road back to Platonic idealism for those who felt that the weight of the arguments of Bacon and Locke pressed them towards the uncanny conclusions of Berkeley and Hume.

Yet just as Hume's influence effectively paralysed conventional philosophy of knowledge in the late eighteenth century, it also gave rise to a philosophically intense Romantic movement in poetry and aesthetics. Deeply troubled by scepticism, but unable to dissolve it, the Romantics made a virtue of abstaining from argument altogether. This represented not a refutation of Hume, but an escape from scepticism by fleeing philosophy. While Monboddo had felt it was his duty to engage with 'the absurdities of his philosophy', among the Romantics Hume was sidelined or ignored.[23] Even Coleridge, who virtually alone attacked Hume's arguments directly, rarely did so, preferring to demonize the relatively conservative Locke. Typical of this is his warning in *Biographia Literaria* that if one accepts without qualification the Lockean principle, *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*, then 'what Hume had demonstratively deduced from this concession concerning cause and effect', would apply 'with equal and crushing force' to all knowledge.[24] The implication, as so often, is that Locke's is the original and greater philosophical error.

Certainly Hume had a radical appeal for some. Hazlitt found his nominalism useful for his own theory of abstraction, and Shelley used the same for more overtly political ends. Nonetheless, and despite the fact

that Hume pioneered the notion of the associative imagination a full ten years before Hartley's 1749 *Observations on Man*, elsewhere the mood was dismissive. More typical is Lamb's complaint to Manning in 1800 of that 'Damned Philosophical Humeian indifference, so cold & unnatural & inhuman',[25] and Wordsworth's sour aside in his 1815 'Essay' to the effect that Adam Smith was 'the worst critic, David Hume not excepted, that Scotland, a soil to which this sort of weed seems natural, has produced'.[26] The anti-Caledonian bent of these remarks, like Lamb's fulminations against the systematizing Scottish intellect in his essay 'Imperfect Sympathies', reveals the extent to which, for the English mind in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a specific philosophical position, viz. Humean scepticism, became identified with the general *practice* of philosophy, and that, in turn, with the culture of the Scottish universities. There is, indeed, an ambivalence to these remarks. Lamb's punning identification of the 'inhuman' in the 'Humeian' obsession with philosophy – on the grounds of the latter's 'indifference' to life – is logically, but not tonally consonant with his own professed indifference to questions of time and space. His rhetoric of attachment involves a stance of ironic detachment and indifference to philosophy's own commitment to knowledge which Hume, for all his ironizing over his sceptical predicament, would have found 'cold and unnatural'. The point here is that despite Lamb's own posture, his attack on philosophy's indifference with an indifference to philosophy is originally targeted not towards 'Damned *Philosophical* Humeian indifference', but 'Damned Philosophical *Humeian* indifference' – in other words, not the activity of philosophizing as such, but specifically the outcome of that activity in Hume's hands, namely an alienating Hobson's choice of scepticism or naturalism. In the same way, the motivating force behind Wordsworth's condemnation of Smith and Hume is their belief, as Wordsworth puts it, 'that there are no fixed principles in human nature [...]'.[27] The anti-philosophical turn in English Romanticism, then, is itself sustained by a deep epistemological anxiety, just as its conviction that scepticism is merely a symptom of philosophy is tainted by the fear that philosophy is not a formal discipline but is itself a form of life, no more optional as an activity than thinking.

A second, related development determining Romanticism's outlook on knowledge is the emergence of a radical theory of creation. Isaiah Berlin identifies this as the Romantic belief 'that truth is not an objective structure, independent of those who seek it, the hidden treasure waiting to be found but is itself in all its guises created by the seeker'.[28] It was a commonplace of eighteenth-century aesthetics and epistemology that in

exceptional cases original genius, like Shaftesbury's 'just PROMETHEUS', might create a kind of beauty which excelled that of the faithful imitator of nature.[29] But only within Romanticism does one find the idea that aesthetic creativeness might be paradigmatic for human knowledge, and only with Romanticism, as Rorty notes, does one encounter the notion 'that truth is made rather than found'.[30] The difference between these views, to use a well-known analogy of the time, is comparable to that between Greek and Hebraic mythologies of divine creation. On the Platonic model, knowledge was prior to actual creation. In Plato's mythology of creation in *Timaeus*, the Demiurge proceeded like a craftsman, manipulating and combining materials which came to hand in order to fashion a new whole. But such elements, like the plan to which he worked, were themselves already discovered or present for him.[31] Similarly, neoclassical conceptions of creation in eighteenth-century Britain generally insisted upon a prior foundation of empirical truth to which new creations were either subject or (more rarely) miraculous exceptions. Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius*, for instance, though outwardly an apology for the creative imagination, insists 'that a man can scarce be said to have invented till he has exercised his judgement'.[32] Even Shaftesbury's non-empirical and potentially subversive notion of '*Poetical* [. . .] *Truth*' is mandated by '*natural Knowledge*, *fundamental Reason*, and *common Sense*'.[33] With the Romantics, however, this order is reversed: knowledge, and epistemic warrant, it was suggested, was *itself* a creative enterprise. After the manner of the Christian God of Genesis who creates *ex nihilo*, the Romantics viewed creation as healing its own difference with truth, thereby annihilating the division between act and thought, means and predetermined end. Predictably, it is in Coleridge's work that the linkage between divine and human creation is most pronounced; the unity of law and spontaneity being expressed by the logos, the original creative word, or 'infinite I AM', of which the human mind was an echo.[34] Elsewhere, however, this new promotion of creation is observable on many levels in Romantic writing. It can be seen in Hazlitt's argument in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* that the agent '*creates* the object'[35] which determines his moral judgement, no less than in Wordsworth's assertion that poetic genius is responsible for 'the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe [. . .]'.[36]

That which liberated knowing, however, also made it risky. The self-ordering and regulative power of the logos is always in peril of being undermined by its playful, satanic alter-ego: '[t]he serpent', as Geoffrey Hartman puts it, 'is the first deconstructor of the logos'.[37] Coleridge

himself was at first pleased to liken the active process of reading in *Biographia Literaria* to 'the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power [...]'.[38] But by the time of the publication of *Aids to Reflection* it had become 'the Symbol of the Understanding', or:

> the *sophistic* Principle, the wily Tempter to Evil by counterfeit Good [...] ever in league with, and always first applying to, the *Desire*, as the inferior nature in Man, the *Woman* in our Humanity; and through the DESIRE prevailing on the WILL (the *Man*hood, *Vir*tus) against the command of the Universal Reason, and against the Light of Reason in the WILL itself.[39]

The danger inherent in a theory which sees knowledge as an ongoing process of creation is that the price of thus emulating God is to be cast out of an Eden of certainty. What is gained is a sense of freedom and of truth as self-created, but also, and consequently, of truth as fallible, indeterminate, and groundless. M. H. Abrams has charted the way in which the Romantic figuration of knowledge typically 'fuses the idea of the circular return with the idea of linear progress', yet the relationship was more one of torsion than of fusion.[40] Coleridge himself, as will be seen, deployed various metaphysical strategies to secure the creative spiral to firm foundations. But among contemporaries still working within a culture of empiricism, commitment was edgy. As Mark Kipperman puts it, the Romantic mind 'hovers' between 'the word as symbol needing to be understood and the mind as freedom, asserting itself in creation'.[41] Yet what might be better understood is the way in which English Romanticism comes to define itself by this oscillation and indecision, prizing indifference and 'negative capability' above argument to the point where the literal articulation of its ideal is itself superseded by its metaphoric presentation, its enactment in poetry. Again, essential to such an understanding is the recognition that in this respect Romanticism in England is a way of rejecting scepticism which comes to refuse the activity of philosophizing as such, insofar as that discipline represents the search for knowledge as a quest for certainty.

Yet by elevating metaphor and poetic figuration to a new level of epistemic autonomy, Romanticism simultaneously proposes two very different alternatives: first, that the notion of created truth might rescue philosophy (and knowledge) from scepticism; and, second, that poetic creation might obviate the need for epistemic certainty, and thus for 'philosophy' altogether. Unlike the American pragmatists a century later, the English Romantics did not always use the notion of creation to sever

ties with empirical foundationalism. Indeed, more frequently they attempted instead to make a foundation *of it*. James was able to assert with confidence that '[i]n our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add*, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable [...]. Man *engenders* truths upon it'.[42] But this was only because he had adopted the '*attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories", supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*'.[43] It is difficult to find such thoroughgoing pragmatism in Romantic texts – leading Dewey to complain that the Romantics merely glorified the flux of creation for its own sake.[44] But this is only half the story. Dewey's charge may, for instance, be true of Keats's notion of negative capability or Lamb's avowed preference for suggestion over comprehension. But when one considers Wordsworth's claim in the 1800 Preface that 'Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge', one finds an enduring desire for epistemic security; for stability or verifiability, or for what is 'first and last' in knowledge: in short, for foundations.[45]

This Romantic ambivalence is characteristically displayed in one of its most celebrated attacks on knowledge, namely De Quincey's definition of literature, which, as Jonathan Bate notes, alternates between the two distinctive positions represented respectively in his 1823 *Letters to a Young Man* and his 1848 essay, 'The Poetry of Pope'.[46] In the first, literature is boldly marked as value-rich and non-epistemic, the domain not of fact, but of power: 'All that is literature seeks to communicate power', De Quincey asserts, 'all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge'.[47] Two and a half decades later, however, De Quincey's position is more subtle, which is to say, uneasy:

> There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is – to *teach*; the function of the second is – to *move* [...]. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy.[48]

Literature now internalizes the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic which originally defined it, and 'power' itself is reinvested with a 'higher' epistemic status, a status which – supported by a sequence of qualifying clauses which threatens to regress ever further – is all the more insecure for being 'higher'. But De Quincey's change of heart is by no means unusual; indeed, in Romantic prose such ambivalence is the norm, and similar patterns can be found in the very writers, Coleridge