

KNOWLEDGE AND
INDIFFERENCE IN
ENGLISH ROMANTIC
PROSE

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From artistic to epistemic creation: the eighteenth century

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*¹

The roots of Romantic discourse in eighteenth-century philosophy and psychology have been charted extensively elsewhere, to the extent that this provenance is now generally accepted in English literary history.² My present claim that there is a divergence between certain tendencies in Wordsworth and Hazlitt – some impelling these writers towards a new, radical theory of creation; others drawing them back to an empirical, foundationalist conception of ‘knowledge’ – is quite compatible with this. Again, I wish neither to essentialize ‘Romanticism’, nor oppose it in some binary way to a preceding tradition. Yet an appreciation of inheritance and continuity in literary theory at the turn of the century should remain alert to ripples in the current, or sudden shifts in the river-bed; in other words, of simultaneous, more dramatic change. It should not elide the possibility that incompatible premises and assumptions, knitted together for a time by consensus and habit, should finally, through changing literary and social conditions, prove impossible to reconcile, and that as a result, certain theoretical problems which had hitherto merely been a source of difficulty may suddenly become unbearable.

Such is the English Romantics’ relation to empiricism. Examples of their outward hostility to empiricism abound. In the 1810–12 fragment ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful’ (later the third Appendix of *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England* [1835]), Wordsworth asserts that ‘[t]he true province of the philosopher is not to grope about in the external world [...] but to look into his own mind & determine the law by which he is affected’.³ Hazlitt’s opposition to traditional empiricism,

meanwhile, is more or less constant throughout his career: in his 1809 *Prospectus of a History of English Philosophy*, one of the touchstones for his criticism of Locke is his conviction that 'reason is a distinct source of knowledge or inlet of truth, over and above *experience*'.⁴ Yet Hazlitt's description of reason as another *inlet* of truth, suggests an equivocation which is matched by Wordsworth's view of the mind as passive and affective. Despite their anti-empiricist leanings, Wordsworth and Hazlitt are noteworthy among the major Romantic writers for their reluctance to jettison the language of empiricism outright, preferring instead to amend or reform it according to new paradigms. One of those paradigms was the concept of creation. The problem that faced both writers, however, was that in their own hands this idea had itself undergone a seismic shift in meaning and significance, signalling a move away from the notion of creation-as-discovery to something closer to that of creation *ex nihilo*, the assertion of the mind's final autonomy and freedom from matter. Unlike the former, however, this more radical sense was incompatible with the still-powerful Lockean view, internalized by Wordsworth and Hazlitt, that knowledge was fundamentally causal and representational in nature. The articulation of the new concept of creation as an epistemic feature of human nature, then, particularly as constructed in the figure of original genius, becomes for Wordsworth and Hazlitt the test case for the possibility of a reformed empiricism which, in the absence of Coleridgean transcendental schemes (for the most part), might manage to satisfy their demand for an adequate account of the mind's freedom and activity, and particularly its *autonomy* in the processes of moral judgement and artistic production.

With such views, Hazlitt and Wordsworth had every reason to reject many of the assumptions of eighteenth-century poetics, as well as resist those which were being sponsored by empiricism in their own time. Utilitarian theories in particular accorded no special status to poetry or the poet, quite the reverse. In the same year that Coleridge completed *Biographia Literaria*, Bentham was writing of poetry that 'it can apply itself to no subject but at the expense of utility and truth. Misrepresentation [is] its work, misconception its truth'.⁵ By 1816 the debate between a largely British utility-based reduction of art and a novel theory of aesthetic autonomy which had just received its mandate from German thought had already polarized. By 1820 Hume's severance of fact from value had cut so deeply that Peacock felt able to proclaim, with some glee, that the inevitable issue of the advance of knowledge throughout history was that 'the empire of thought is withdrawn from poetry'.⁶ The

prose works of Wordsworth and Hazlitt display the hairline cracks which initiate this rift, leading them to challenge the foundations of representational 'knowledge' with a theory of creation, a challenge to epistemology which finally loops back to the same desideratum of epistemic certainty from which it seeks to escape. Nor did this division itself spring from nowhere. Before examining the complex epistemological and counter-epistemological manoeuvrings of English Romantic Prose, then, it is important to understand how a discourse of psychological creation which was long-lived but previously marginal in British philosophy came, by the late eighteenth century, to be in a position to shake the foundations, it seemed, of philosophy itself.

INSPIRATION AND THE SUBLIME FROM PUTTENHAM TO BURKE

To give a comprehensive account of the development of the idea of artistic creation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries falls well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is possible to indicate those currents of thought which encouraged the idea (in either of its forms), and those whose natural tendency was to stifle or deny it. The tradition of thought which was most congenial to the notion of the artist as a creator sprang initially (though not exclusively, as will be seen) from two main sources, both classical. The first was Neoplatonic, and resulted from a fusion of an analogy of the artist with Plato's Demiurge, or divine craftsman, with an amended version of his account of the poet as one 'possessed', such that inspiration was now held to confer upon the artist a divine grace in execution and composition which was beyond the normal rules of art. Promoted by Sidney and Puttenham in the late sixteenth century, this tradition survived, albeit in a muted form, into the eighteenth, despite the fact that the Platonic philosophy upon which it rested, though it continued to find support with Cudworth, More and Shaftesbury, was by then anachronistic. The second was a theory of the sublime derived from Longinus, but transformed in such a way as to place ever greater stress on the spontaneous imaginative response which characterized the experience of the sublime object. Two of the most significant names attached to this trend – John Dennis, and later, Edmund Burke – developed it in different ways. To Dennis, the emotions associated with the sublime represented a possible bulwark against the kind of dogmatic Aristotelianism exemplified by the school of criticism associated with Thomas Rymer. To Burke, however, the passionate quality of the sublime experience linked it with the non-representational basis of poetry itself.

The complex relationship observed in the Introduction between the Platonic and Hebraic-Christian paradigms of creation begins to unravel in the literary theory of the Renaissance. Even here, however, it is still bound up (and often confused) with other questions: to what extent is the artist inspired by some other force? how can creation, properly so called, be explained within a mimetic theory of poetry? how far is it possible and proper to compare the artist's creativity to God's? These issues lie buried like seeds beneath different theoretical agendas, and are not always addressed directly. When they are, they are often answered in a manner which might surprise an observer habituated to the oppositions of post-Romantic theory.

George Puttenham, for example, seeks in *The Arte of English Poesie* to establish the credentials of poetry as an *art*: that is, an activity based upon 'a certaine order of rules prescribed by reason, and gathered by experience'.⁷ Yet his defence of this position is built upon some peculiar foundations. Initially noting that the Greek root of English term 'poet' signifies 'maker', he proceeds to interpret this classical paradigm along Christian lines, rejecting the Platonic model of the demiurge, and embracing the divine analogy of artist as creator *ex nihilo*. As God, 'without any traueell of his diuine imagination, made all the world of nought', so 'the very Poet makes and contriues out of his owne braine both the verse and matter of his poeme, and not by any foreine copie or example, as doth the translator'. Despite this, it is clear that Puttenham holds the view that poetry, no less than other forms of art, is imitative. But the manner by which he links this position, together with what has been written already (while still on the first page of the essay) with a further thesis of inspirationism deserves to be quoted at length, insofar as it demonstrates the tight and complex knot of ideas which it was to be the task of the eighteenth century to unravel:

And neuerthelesse without any repugnancie at all, a Poet may in some sort be said a follower or imitator, because he can expresse the true and liuely [image?] of euery thing [which?] is set before him [...] and so in that respect is both a maker and a counterfaior: and Poesie an art not only of making, but also of imitation. And this science in his perfection, can not grow, but by some diuine instinct, the Platonicks call it *furor* [...].⁸

From this Puttenham draws a conclusion regarding the absolute autonomy of the poet which (in its opposition to his contention that poetry is an 'art', reducible to empirical rule) forms a thorny paradox which is the direct ancestor of the problem Wordsworth and Hazlitt faced, and would seek to overcome with epistemological indifference: namely, how

can genius's freely produced elements be verified by lawful experience?⁹ The tension between an ego-grounded knowledge and the figurative, creative subjectivity expressed in poetry is already present. In this light, moreover, there would seem to be more than coincidence in the similarity between Puttenham's attempt at a compromise solution (attributing to imagination (or 'phantasie') a special kind of truth which he compares to the effect of a refracting mirror on light), and Hazlitt's attempt, over two hundred years later, to explain originality by comparing the mind to a prism, untwisting the rays of truth. But this is to anticipate later discussion.

Puttenham identifies creation with inspiration, but this does not always happen. Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie* of 1595, despite being more often cited as a Renaissance manifesto for imaginative artistic freedom, is in many ways a less fiery and more thoughtful attempt to reconcile Aristotelian and Platonic views of poetry. Though Sidney sees creation as the God-like part of man 'which in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie: when with the force of a diuine breath, he bringeth things forth far surpassing her [i.e. Nature's] dooings',¹⁰ like Puttenham, he insists that poetry 'is an arte of imitation, for so *Aristotle* termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight [...]'.¹¹ He further follows Aristotle in positioning poetry between history and philosophy according to its ability both to philosophize history's 'bare *Was*',¹² and aid moral instruction insofar as it 'coupleth the generall notion with the particular example', or 'yeeldeth to the powers of the minde, an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a woordish description [...]'.¹³

Sidney is aware that he is in danger of collapsing poetry into rhetoric, and endeavours to escape this outcome by making creativity the distinguishing feature of the poet.¹⁴ As he puts it: 'onely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any [...] subiection, lifted vp with the vigor of his owne inuention, dooth growe in effect, another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or quite newe formes such as neuer were in Nature [...]'.¹⁵ This echoes Puttenham's theory of radical *creatio ex nihilo*, but Sidney attempts to side-step Puttenham's problem over how the products of this process can be verified by adding the further requirement of learning. New products are valuable because of the operation of an extra factor (and thus a standard of truth) regulating individual spontaneity – not, as in Plato, the 'inspiring of a diuine force, farre aboue mans wit', but the tutelage of nature and experience.¹⁶ He concludes:

'A Poet, no industrie can make, if his owne *Genius* bee not carried vnto it [...]. Yet confesse I alwayes, that as the firtillest ground must bee manured, so must the highest flying wit, haue a *Dedalus* to guide him'; the 'three wings' of which are: 'Arte, Imitation, and Exercise'. These twin elements of genius¹⁷ and skill cannot be separated in poetry, '[f]or, there being two principal parts, matter to be expressed by wordes, and words to expresse the matter, in neyther [alone], wee vse Arte, or Imitation, rightly'.¹⁸

Sidney's tempered Platonism and optimism about poetry, however, ran against the contemporary philosophical current. Bacon also accepted the common distinction between knowledge acquired by 'words' and that gained from 'matter', but was far more censorious about the former. It was 'the first distemper of learning, when men study words and not matter'.¹⁹ His main target here is scholasticism, which with verbal distinctions 'brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit [...]'.²⁰ Nonetheless, poesy remains open to a similar charge:

POESY is a part of learning in measure of words for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely licensed, and doth truly refer to the Imagination; which, being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things [...].²¹

The key word here is 'unlawful'. The very creativity which Sidney found to distinguish and privilege poesy is, to Bacon's embryonic empiricism, deeply suspect. If history is recorded fact and the basis of all knowledge,²² then poetry 'is nothing else but Feigned History, which may be styled as well in prose as in verse'. His attitude to the argument from inspiration is, in this context, unsurprising: poetry, he notes, 'was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shews of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things'.²³

Bacon views poetry simultaneously with discomfort and tolerance. Nonetheless, having attributed the production of poetry to imagination, he seems to encounter difficulties when examining the nature of that faculty itself later in the *Advancement*. By establishing imagination as a connective faculty between the senses (including the will and appetite) on one hand and reason on the other, he comes to acknowledge that faith itself presumes a certain amount of imaginative freedom. He infers from

this that 'reason hath over the imagination that commandment which a magistrate hath over a free citizen; who may come also to rule in his turn. For we see that in matters of Faith and Religion we raise our imagination above our Reason [...]'. Still, though Bacon seems to be embarrassed enough by this episode to reiterate his general position that there can be no science of imagination, together with his relegation of Poesy to 'a pleasure or play of imagination', there is no reason to interpret it as anything more than an incidental concession to religion which is superfluous to his general inductive epistemological argument. This in turn remains fundamentally incompatible with Sidney's notion of a distinctly 'poetic' truth, inspirational or otherwise.²⁴

It is not until the early eighteenth century, in the work of Shaftesbury, that another concerted attempt is made to develop a theory of artistic creation on Neoplatonic lines – and here again, this is done against the tide of the prevailing philosophy, which by this time had moved into the channel opened up by Locke. Shaftesbury is a writer about whom it is notoriously difficult to generalize. Above all, he had no interest in system-building.²⁵ But certain impulses are evident in his thought: an opposition to Hobbes and to mechanistic or materialist accounts of human nature, as well as to the Lockean thesis that the mind has no knowledge other than what it constructs from simple ideas derived from sense-experience. Shaftesbury's positive theory of knowledge is linked with his Platonic theology: as reality is infinite and not atomistic, and spiritual rather than material, the mind which is the 'Universal-One' is that which gives particular existents their being. Consequently, it follows from the principle that the mind in general is alone formative (where matter is passive),²⁶ that the human mind has its own activity:

I consider, That as there is *one* general Mass, *one* Body of the Whole; so to this Body there is *an Order*, to this *Order*, a MIND: That to this *general* MIND each *particular-one* must have relation; as being of like Substance [...] alike active upon Body [...] and more like still, if it co-operates with It to general Good, and strives *to will* according to that best of *Wills*.²⁷

For the present purpose, the real significance of Shaftesbury's epistemology, however, is in the role it accords to beauty, which, rather than being a supervenient quality, is seen as operative; as identical with truth. It resides not in an object, but in the *act* of creation.²⁸ 'Will it not be found', Shaftesbury asks rhetorically, '[t]hat what is BEAUTIFUL is *Harmonious* and *Proportionable*: What is Harmonious and Proportionable, is TRUE; and what is at once both *Beautiful* and *True*, is, of consequence,

Agreeable and *GOOD*?²⁹ It follows from this that in Shaftesbury the sense of beauty has gained unprecedented epistemological importance: 'Who, then, can possibly have *A TASTE* of this kind, without being beholden to *PHILOSOPHY*?'³⁰ The postulation of the identity of beauty and truth in an original, unified and creative being (whether divine or human) thus enables Shaftesbury to pass freely between questions of aesthetics, psychology, epistemology and moral philosophy, as when he declares that 'the most natural Beauty in the World is *Honesty*, and *Moral Truth*. For all *Beauty* is *TRUTH* [...]. In Poetry, which is all Fable, *Truth* still is the Perfection.'³¹

From this dynamic, aestheticized Platonism emerges Shaftesbury's idea of artistic genius as a power which, in the manner of the God of which it is itself a reflection, harmonizes, unifies, and creates anew:

But for the Man, who truly and in a just sense deserves the Name of *Poet* [...]. Such a *Poet* is indeed a second *Maker*: a just *PROMETHEUS*, under *JOVE*. Like that Sovereign Artist or universal Plastick Nature, he forms a *Whole*, coherent and proportion'd in it-self, with due Subjection and Subordinacy of constituent Parts.³²

Yet Shaftesbury's hypostasizing of beauty and truth in the sovereign form of God does little to solve the riddle of the nature of human creation. And as far as his own position on the matter is concerned, Shaftesbury is, in most respects, distinctly Neoclassical. For example, though he distinguishes '[t]he mere Face-Painter', who 'copies what he sees, and minutely traces every Feature', from 'the Men of Invention and Design', he defines the latter only according to their capacity to generalize, and execute works which conform to 'those natural Rules of Proportion, and *Truth*'.³³ There is no implication that the artist is a creator *ex nihilo*, or that he might produce the very rules by which his work is to be judged, and still less, as yet, to suggest the Romantics' troubled surmisal that he makes, rather than finds truth.

The concept of inspiration, moreover, seems to have had its day. Shaftesbury is highly critical of 'those first Poets who began this Pretence to *Inspiration*', and insists that 'the *inspiring* *DIVINITY* or *MUSE* having [...] submitted her Wit and Sense to the Mechanick Rules of *human arbitrary* Composition; she must [...] submit herself to *human Arbitration* [...]'.³⁴ Nor does he reserve any great esteem for imagination, which is invariably subordinated to reason. Continuing on the subject of inspiration, he claims that anyone who believes that they can 'recognize the Divine Spirit, and receive it in themselves, un-subject (as they imagine)

to any Rule [...] is building Castles in the Air [...] as the exercise of an aerial *Fancy*, or heated *Imagination*'.³⁵

In a sense, Shaftesbury is acknowledging a point made earlier in this chapter: that the presumption of divine intervention in classical notions of poetic 'inspiration' sits uneasily with the premise of epistemic freedom necessary for a more subject-based notion of human creativity. But if, aside from this, the supernatural and un-Christian implications of the concept of inspiration made it simply distasteful even to such Platonically minded thinkers as Sidney and Shaftesbury, another ancient idea – that of the sublime – was to enjoy a far less troubled inception into the theory of the eighteenth century.

The concept of the sublime was a relative latecomer to English literary theory. Its germination can be dated to Nicolas Boileau's 1674 translation of Longinus, but it did not become an established part of the critical lexicon until the early mid-eighteenth century. In the work of John Dennis, the sublime is brought into close contact with a developed theory of artistic creation and genius. Dennis was already aware of the work of Longinus when, while crossing the Alps in 1688, in a curious precursor of Wordsworth's own experience, he felt at first hand emotions reminiscent of the Greek writer's account of the sublime. Moved to examine the concept further, it was natural that he should do so in terms of the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke. The result was an empirical and psychological theory of the poetic passions.

Dennis's early work bears this out. 'Poetical Genius', he argues in the 1696 *Remarks on a Book Entitled, Prince Arthur*, 'is it self a Passion. A Poet then is oblig'd always to speak to the Heart. And it is for this reason, that Point and Conceit, and all that they call Wit, is to be for ever banish'd from true Poetry; because he who uses it, speaks to the Head alone.'³⁶ In *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) he refines this into a definition which further distinguishes poetic enthusiasm from the more vulgar passions, and links it to the sublime:

But one Thing we have omitted, That as Thoughts produce the Spirit, the Spirit produces and makes the Expression; which is known by Experience to all who are Poets: for never any one, while he was rapt with Enthusiasm, wanted either Words or Harmony [...] So from what we have said, we may venture to lay down this Definition of Poetical Genius: Poetical Genius, in a Poem, is the true Expression of Ordinary or Enthusiastick Passions proceeding from Ideas to which it naturally belongs; and Poetical Genius, in a Poet, is the Power of expressing such Passion worthily: And the Sublime is a great Thought, express'd with the Enthusiasm that belongs to it [...].³⁷

Here, the language of inspiration is articulated by the new philosophy of ideas. While Dennis retains some of the old sense of the infallibility of the 'inspired' poetic genius, in his hands it is translated into an idea of the harmonious relationship between the enthusiastic passions and the ideas to which they 'naturally' belong. The sublime, in turn, becomes the loftiest utterance of poetic genius.³⁸

Dennis's emphasis on genius, enthusiasm and the emotions of the sublime may seem to foreshadow Romanticism; not least when later in the same essay he claims that, of the 'Three Things which contribute to the Perfection of Poetry', 'The First is Nature, which is the Foundation and Basis of all. For Nature is the same Thing with Genius, and Genius and Passion are all one.' But this is not the whole picture, as the other two elements, no less essential, are 'Art, by which I mean, those Rules, and that Method, which capacitate us to manage every thing with the utmost Dexterity, that may contribute to the Raising of Passion', and third, 'The Instrument by which the Poet makes his Imitation, or the Language in which he writes.'³⁹ Though he would have had no truck with the concept of the artist as creator *ex nihilo*, the tensions in Dennis's theory are comparable to Puttenham's: the tendency of any assertion of free artistic genius is towards some kind of conception of aesthetic autonomy; of a writer or a painter or a musician who spontaneously generates new but nonetheless exemplary rules of composition. But the philosophical apparatus capable of sustaining such a conception was still a long way from being assembled. It is, perhaps, a paradoxical consequence of the advanced nature of Dennis's version of genius as both a sensitivity to, and an ability to express passionate thoughts, that more than critics like Addison, he felt the need for a secure foothold for poetry in the rules of art. There seems little reason, then, to dissent from Hooker's opinion that Dennis should be viewed more as 'a sensitive and intelligent classicist' than a precursor of Romanticism.⁴⁰ He was not the first to face difficulty in attempting to encompass an increasingly liberal theory of creative genius with an empiricist epistemology, and he was not to be the last.

By the time Burke came to add the 'Introduction on taste' to the second edition of his *Philosophical Enquiry*, however, the implications of an empirical point of view for aesthetic discussion were much more clearly defined. For instance, Burke notes that though 'the mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own', this consists 'either in representing at pleasure the images of [...] the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order'.

Creativity of the *ex nihilo* order is impossible, as 'it must be observed, that this power of the imagination is incapable of producing any thing absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses'.⁴¹ Burke's ambivalent attitude to epistemic creation is not unusual of the mid-eighteenth century, but his persistent and unyielding commitment to empirical method, and his refusal to concede any territory whatsoever to the operation of formal or final causes, certainly is.⁴² As a result, the *Enquiry* becomes of immense interest, in that it effectively takes the empiricist defence of Neoclassical aesthetics to its limits; to the point indeed where the tension between the two, particularly regarding the complex emotions of the sublime, and the nature of poetic imitation, becomes so pronounced as to question many of the assumptions of Neoclassicism itself.

Burke's dogged genetic and sensationist approach to his subject leads him quickly to the conclusion, not only that the sublime originates from objects 'fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain', and that these 'ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure', but further, that 'at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful [...]'.⁴³ This disrupts the traditional correlation of taste and pleasure by describing an aesthetic experience which is not so easily quantifiable due to the infinity connoted by its objects and the inscrutability of its emotional content.⁴⁴ There is, then, in the *Enquiry*'s discussion of the sublime, the suggestion of an aesthetic of freedom.

The sublime is not alone in its association with the infinite. Burke's sensationism draws his investigation to a certain feature of language: 'words [...] seem to me to affect us in a manner very different from that in which we are affected by natural objects, or by painting or architecture [...]'.⁴⁵ The reason for this, he surmises, is that the most general effect of words 'does not arise from their forming pictures of the several things they would represent in the imagination [...]'.⁴⁶ If it is possible, as Burke believes, for words to affect us before a clear idea or meaning can be assigned to them, the implications for poetry are radical: 'we may observe that poetry, taken in its most general sense, cannot with strict propriety be called an art of imitation'.⁴⁷ And yet the fact that words can operate in the absence of clear ideas (and therefore knowledge), lends poetry a peculiar affinity with the sublime in the context what might be called Burke's aesthetics of privation. Just as the feeling of a lack of power is a condition of the sublime, so the want of a clear *image* of a thing is a feature of poetry. This privation, however, is effectively a release from the burden

of verisimilitude. It gives poetry scope not only to give expression to those elements of existence which are beyond pictorial representation, such as human sympathy and passion, but also to explore or even create new elements. In Burke's own words, 'by words we have it in our power to make such *combinations* as we cannot possibly do otherwise', and thereby 'to give a new life and force to the simple object'.⁴⁸

Yet despite the innovation behind Burke's theory of poetic creativity, it remained in tension with his epistemology. To that extent he is very much a product of his age. The Lockean epistemology, though modified, is still in place, together with its insistence upon the necessity of an empirical principle for verifying truth, and for a corresponding clarity, exactness, and even austerity in language. Notions of poetic inspiration or expressions of feelings of sublimity could not be woven into this – at least, not seamlessly. Poetry might be tolerated for a number of reasons – it might even, as with Addison, Dennis and Burke, be granted a certain creative licence – but it was not to be permitted to impeach knowledge. Inspiration in particular, in its classical form at least, had a bleak future in this context, as not only was it impossible to explain empirically, but, unlike the notions of the sublime and genius, it had only a slight relation to the issues of subjectivity which would grow out of the discourse of late eighteenth-century psychology in Britain.

The problem for theories of artistic creation after Locke was fundamentally bound up with their epistemological implications: unsettling 'knowledge' yet seeming all the while to be complicit with knowing. In other words, the question was one of how to allow the products of genius and the experience of the sublime a non-trivial, cognitive role in human life without reducing them to any other mode of knowledge; of how simultaneously to maintain poetry's seriousness and distinctness from science in the face of the erosion of a Neoclassical confidence in poetry's access to reason. It was empiricism that was responsible for this erosion, but empiricism was slow, painfully slow, at producing an alternative theory of literary value which satisfied both the requirements of aesthetic freedom and epistemology. In fact, empiricism was itself the stumbling block. Such a theory, as Francis Ferguson has indicated, would require a profound overhaul of Burke's empirical approach to the structure of the object, and particularly 'the Burkean inability or refusal to distinguish between our experience of objects and our experience of representations of objects'.⁴⁹ As it turned out, one form this would take was Kant's aesthetic merging of subject of object, which on one hand seemed merely to offer the subject sublime compensations for epistemic loss, but at the same

time had the potential to obviate the dualisms so beloved of empiricism which sustained epistemology itself.

ASPECTS OF EMPIRICISM

Crossing Hume's fork: the problem of value

Both inspirationism and the discourse of the sublime dissented from a philosophical culture which, by the first decades of the eighteenth century, was confronting and processing the principles laid out in John Locke's 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The notion of mental creation itself leads a marginal half-life throughout the age of Pope and Johnson, potentially subversive and in a constant state of tension with many of the leading philosophical ideas of the period. The first of these – the theory of representative realism – lies at the heart of Locke's epistemology. Put simply, the claims made by this thesis are: first, the realist one that there is a world the existence of which does not depend upon experience; second, the argument that our perception of that world is dependent upon it affecting us (in a causal way); and third, the *representational* theory that we only have indirect apprehension of that world; that is, that we have no knowledge of reality which is unmediated by ideas.⁵⁰ Representative realism leaves its mark on practically all empiricist thought in the eighteenth century (Berkeley and Hume included), and even manages to survive (though in a modified form) Thomas Reid's sustained campaign against it.

More importantly, however, it is this doctrine which proves to be most vulnerable to the epistemic implications of a robust theory of artistic creation, effectively placing the mind in a relation of dependency to an object of perception to which it has only indirect access. In particular, Locke is quite categorical on the causality of perception: ideas of sensation, he asserts, 'are the *Impressions* that are made on our *Senses* by Outward Objects, that are extrinsical to the Mind [...]'.⁵¹ Sensation and reflection, then, are 'the only Originals, from whence all our *Ideas* take their beginnings'.⁵² The most important corollary of this principle is that in perception, 'the *Understanding* is merely *passive*' and unable to produce new, simple ideas:

These *simple Ideas*, when offered to the mind, the *Understanding* can no more refuse to have, or alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones in it self, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the Images or *Ideas*, which, the Objects set before it, do therein produce.⁵³

Locke, of course, recognizes that certain operations of the human mind prove the limitations of the 'blank sheet of paper' simile. 'Memory', for instance, 'signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before'.⁵⁴ It is important, however, to distinguish this (limited) psychological activity from an epistemic activity, in the sense that truth itself is something *made*. This is discounted by Locke in his consistent adherence to the principle that knowledge must correspond to objects as the effect to the cause. Locke equates his sense of psychological activity with 'Wit', which 'lying most in the assemblage of *Ideas*, and putting them together with quickness and variety', is distinguished from '*Judgement*', which 'lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, *Ideas* [...] thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude [...]'. Wit, though it 'strikes so lively on the Fancy', is not to be trusted, as 'there is required no labour of thought, to examine what Truth or Reason there is in it. The Mind without looking any farther, rests satisfied with the agreeableness of the Picture [...]'.⁵⁵ Here we reach the nub of the problem: while Locke's empiricism is comfortable with, and even requires, a synthetic capability of the mind, it cannot permit that such syntheses might be independently true, much less produce truth. Consequently, Locke often struggles to articulate in just what the power of judgement consists.

By stressing the role of judgement Locke is trying to avoid a route notoriously taken by Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argued that, as sense-experience was nothing but the effect of material encounters between the sense-organs and the outside world, which set off a train of thoughts in the mind and became, when the stimulus was removed, '*decaying sense*' or imagination, then mental discourse or understanding itself could be nothing other than a kind of imagination, and reason the same transferred into verbal form.⁵⁶ Truth, in other words, is merely nominal: a matter of words.⁵⁷ To Hobbes, Locke's concern about association would have made no sense, as '[n]atural sense and imagination are not subject to absurdity. Nature itself cannot err' – only language leads us astray.⁵⁸

If Hobbes provides a clearer illustration than Locke of the implications of nakedly causal theories of perception, he does so too with regard to representationalism. The first lines of the first chapter of *Leviathan* declare that, singly, the thoughts of man 'are every one a *representation* or *appearance*, of some quality or other accident, of a body without us [...]'.⁵⁹ The epistemological consequences of this for Hobbes are clear. With characteristic terseness, Hobbes maps out the fork that Hume was

later to wield with such devastating effect. There can only be two kinds of knowledge, he claims; empirical '*knowledge of fact*', or of 'sense and memory'; and '*knowledge of the consequence of one affirmation to another*', or 'science', such as geometrical truth.⁶⁰ Knowingly or not, in the *Essay*, Locke follows Hobbes in accepting that 'We can have *Knowledge* no farther than we have *Ideas*',⁶¹ but cannot accept that truth itself is merely nominal. The 'conformity between our [simple] *Ideas* and the reality of Things', he claims, is guaranteed providentially, or 'by the Wisdom and Will of our Maker'.⁶² Ultimately, truth is the gift of God.

At the same time, Locke gave powerful impetus to the discourse of creation in the eighteenth century. By dispensing with all talk of 'substances' and equating identity with consciousness, his own brand of idea-empiricism paved the way for the development of philosophical subjectivism.⁶³ However, it is equally certain that in attempting to rescue some notion of universal truth from the wreck of innatism by emphasizing the distinction between the mere 'play' of wit or imagination, and the authority of judgement, he contributed to a general climate of hostility towards imagination.⁶⁴ Yet again, by its tendency to give the testimony of sense more weight than that of judgement and reason, idea-empiricism (or representative realism) seemed to undermine certain concepts – principally that of the operation of necessary laws within the natural world, but also those of identity, and objectivity in judgements of morals and taste. This is precisely the observation made by Hume, who (particularly if one considers his influence upon Kant) becomes a pivotal figure for any consideration of the *agon* of knowledge and creation as it evolved through an ailing empirical tradition and into Romanticism.

In a sense, Hume takes representative realism to its logical conclusion. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), he sets out from the proposition '[t]hat all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent'.⁶⁵ Consequently, there can be no difference in kind between sensation and ideas: instead, '[t]he difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness' – sensation generally being 'livelier' than its ideas.⁶⁶ This distinction is extended within the realm of ideas itself, where Hume observes that 'the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination', where 'the perception is faint and languid [...]'. However, the imagination has at least one redeeming feature: it is 'not restrain'd to the same order and form with the original impressions; while the memory is in a manner ty'd down in

that respect [...]'.⁶⁷ Upon this observation, Hume builds his theory of association: the principles by which ideas are connected cannot, he reasons, be radically different to those by which sensations are connected. Thus:

This uniting principle among ideas is not to be consider'd as an inseparable connexion; for that has been already excluded from the imagination [...] we are only to regard it as a gentle force, which commonly prevails [...]. The qualities, from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner convey'd from one idea to another, are [...] Resemblance, Contiguity in time or place, and CAUSE and EFFECT.⁶⁸

That which to Locke was a kind of madness becomes, in Hume's hands, the basis of reason itself: as he later puts it, 'all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation'. It follows from this that Locke's carefully drawn distinction between judgement and wit is collapsed: 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me.' This comes at a price, however. Hume concludes that '[o]bjects have no discoverable connexion together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another.' In other words, '[f]rom the mere repetition of any past impression, even to infinity, *there will never arise any new original idea*, such as that of a necessary connexion [...]'.⁶⁹ In his sustained pursuit of the logical implications of representative realism, Hume has finally arrived at a point where concepts of natural law seem to be little more than beguiling fictions – necessary fictions perhaps, but fictions nonetheless. Nor does Hume leave off there. If the law-like operation of the world as described by reason is illusory, then it follows that other notions licensed by reason are every bit as fictional. Once Locke's idea of judgement has been eroded by sensation-empiricism, for example, the integrity of consciousness appears to crumble, and identity itself is impeached. Hume concludes that man is incapable of knowing himself as a unified being. He is, indeed, the sum of 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement'.⁷⁰

In this way, Hume's division, noted earlier, of all knowable phenomena into 'Matters of Fact' and 'Relations of Ideas' can now be seen to stem from his theory that every idea is derived either from a corresponding impression or from a composition of simpler ideas which are themselves

derived from corresponding impressions. Hume discusses this dualism in the opening passage of Section Four of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. [...] Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. [...] Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.⁷¹

Consequently, for Hume all that is knowable must fall on one side or the other of the fork of non-existential and self-evident or demonstrable propositions (expressing the relations of ideas) and existential propositions which are neither self-evident nor demonstrable (expressing matters of fact). There is no crossing this fork. Any statement purporting to express a self-evident existential proposition, for instance, is for Hume quite groundless. The first sphere to fall foul of Hume's fork, then, is that of value judgements, and in particular the moral imperative disguised as statement of fact – or as Hume puts it, the 'ought' statement lurking among 'is' statements – which is often to be found in works of moral philosophy, and whose veracity, Hume argues in the *Treatise*, ought to be questioned:

For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.⁷²

Hume, of course, has his own answer to this puzzle, which is that 'when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it'.⁷³ We shall return to this answer in a moment. As far as knowledge is concerned, however, the domain of value lies beyond reach. At the same time, the fork of 'fact' and 'relations of ideas' is an unequal one. Rationalist philosophy had traditionally attempted to resolve the former into the latter. Hume was aware, however, that philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz, despite

their claims to deductive thoroughness, ultimately grounded their deductions on self-evident propositions, or axioms, the truth of which could not be demonstrated merely in terms of the logical relations of the ideas involved, but which, if accepted as merely factual, could no longer function as the foundations of the system of necessary knowledge these philosophers envisaged. One such premise, and perhaps the most important, is what Leibniz calls the principle of sufficient reason, or the proposition that there is a reason or explanation for every event which occurs.⁷⁴ This is the kind of purportedly existential but necessary proposition that Kant was later to identify as synthetic *a priori* and in need of transcendental, rather than logical, deduction. To Hume, however, the related claim that 'every event has a cause' was either factual and therefore contingent or, by striving for necessity, fell between the fork of knowledge. Either way, any edifice of reasoning built upon it was doomed to collapse. In this way, he was able to maintain that since '*all our ideas are copy'd from our impressions*', by extension *all* reasoning is itself finally based on the inductive and factual.⁷⁵ With this, Hume linked the fates of epistemic and moral certainty by casting both as dubiously 'value-added' to experience. By so doing, he not only proscribed traditional metaphysics, but effectively alienated his own philosophy from the unreflective thought of ordinary life which implicitly traded upon synthetic *a priori* propositions as stable currency.

Hume himself was acutely aware of this, but there is continued disagreement in the immense literature on Hume as to what he chose to do about it. One of the twentieth century's most influential views was that of Norman Kemp Smith, who argued that Hume's intention in the *Treatise* was always to obviate epistemological scepticism concerning the possibility of *justification* of belief with a naturalistic *description* of human belief, according to which '*we retain a degree of belief, which is sufficient for our purpose, either in philosophy or common life*' – a line of thought extended by Reid.⁷⁶ More recent commentators, however, working in the wake of Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic dichotomy (a modernized version of Hume's fork), have questioned whether scepticism can be so easily tamed without abnegating epistemology, perhaps even philosophy, altogether. Robert Fogelin, for example, argues that Hume's scepticism is so comprehensive that naturalism coheres with it only by postulating that philosophizing, and by extension philosophical scepticism, are themselves 'natural' human conditions. However, this means the suspension of epistemology as much as naturalism, and the holding of both in an uneasy alliance: 'The mitigated skepticism that Hume recommends is the

causal product of two competing influences: Pyrrhonian doubt on one side, natural instinct on the other. We do not argue for mitigated scepticism; we find ourselves in it.⁷⁷ H. O. Mounce, meanwhile, agrees, claiming that Kemp Smith conflates two kinds of incompatible naturalism: one, that of Hume and eighteenth-century Scottish philosophy, which subordinated knowledge to belief, and another, that of scientific positivism, which presumes the possibility of a rational explanation of the world. In other words, he ‘confuses *epistemological* naturalism, the view that our knowledge depends on what is given us by nature, with *metaphysical* naturalism, the view that there is no reality apart from the natural world’. Consequently, there is no positivist route around scepticism for Hume, just groundless belief, precipitating the passages of self-dramatizing despair and irony which always threaten to run out of control and sink the author ‘in the scepticism from which he seeks to deliver us’.⁷⁸

Certainly one of Hume’s responses to finding empiricism unequal to the task of sustaining knowledge was to divorce philosophical inquiry from ordinary lived experience – from dinner, backgammon and the company of friends. From the perspective of the ‘common affairs of life’, he observed, such speculations ‘appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther’.⁷⁹ It is precisely this voice of the quotidian, of ‘life’, which the Romantics attempt to recover for a philosophical mode of thought which Hume wished to confine to the study or the academy. The pressing questions after Hume are: how might certainty be made a part of the totality of lived experience?; and can this reconciliation of fact and value be effected within philosophy, or must philosophy itself take its place within a more holistic context of knowing and being? English Romanticism comes to define itself by its sense of its own equivocal response to this problem of knowing, oscillating not between scepticism and naturalism, but between knowledge and an indifference to knowing which might encompass other (possibly *supernatural*) modes of being or ‘life’. In this manner it seeks both to argue with *and* transcend the stark injunction, with which Hume closes the *Enquiry* and I opened this chapter, to commit ‘to the flames’ any volume containing neither factual nor logical truths.

Hume’s challenge still exercises philosophers today. For example, one way of reading the recent debate between coherentists such as Quine, Rorty and Davidson on one hand, and epistemological foundationalists like Roderick Chisholm and Ernest Sosa on the other is as between different ways of overcoming the alienation of fact and value created by Hume. The coherentist is apt to reject the division outright, arguing that

the traditional notion that the justification of belief rests upon a neutral non-epistemic ground which is somehow 'given' is a mistake. On the contrary, knowledge is, in an epistemic sense, always already evaluative, which is simply to say that there is no clear distinction between evaluative and non-evaluative propositions in the first place: for Davidson, meaning itself is 'contaminated by theory, by what is held to be true'.⁸⁰ Moreover, any philosophy which is indifferent to this distinction may well be led to call into question the need for an epistemology which purports to seek the 'ground' of knowledge. Knowing becomes a matter of what Rorty terms 'conversation' within a space of reasons rather than one of 'confrontation' with a value-neutral reality.⁸¹ Foundationalists, meanwhile, continue to preserve Hume's distinction, and thus the traditional questions of epistemology as subsequently evolved by Kant, by insisting that the coherentist account ignores the irreducibly normative nature of justification. For these thinkers, the avoidance of a more vicious division within the value/fact dichotomy means accepting that in knowledge, just as in morals and aesthetics, value is grounded in fact by virtue of what Chisholm calls 'the *supervenient* character of epistemic justification'.⁸² As Ernest Sosa puts it: 'All epistemic justification [...] derive[s] from what is not epistemically evaluative.'⁸³

The conflict between these outlooks is already present in English Romantic prose. But what has broadened and hardened as a debate (or even a refusal of debate) between writers and between camps of philosophers is played out as a localized tension within the work of individual Romantic writers. Moreover, because one of the leading Romantic strategies for evading Hume's bifurcation is one of indifference to knowing, denying the value of certainty per se, close reading will have to be sensitive to how this peculiar gambit merely reproduces the same problem on new and different levels, as foundational 'knowledge' is repressed, only to reappear (to adapt an image of de Man's) like the Hydra's head, once more.⁸⁴

In the meantime, it testifies either to the confidence or the anxiety of Hume's age and that of later eighteenth-century thought that many writers chose either to ignore Hume's findings or adopt and incorporate aspects of his language without acknowledging their implications. One quarter where this was not the case, however, was that of Hume's own country, Scotland, where Thomas Reid took his conclusions seriously enough to attempt to eradicate scepticism by destroying its roots, namely the 'idea' philosophy, or representative realism of Descartes and Locke, and installing naturalism in its stead. Before proceeding to a discussion